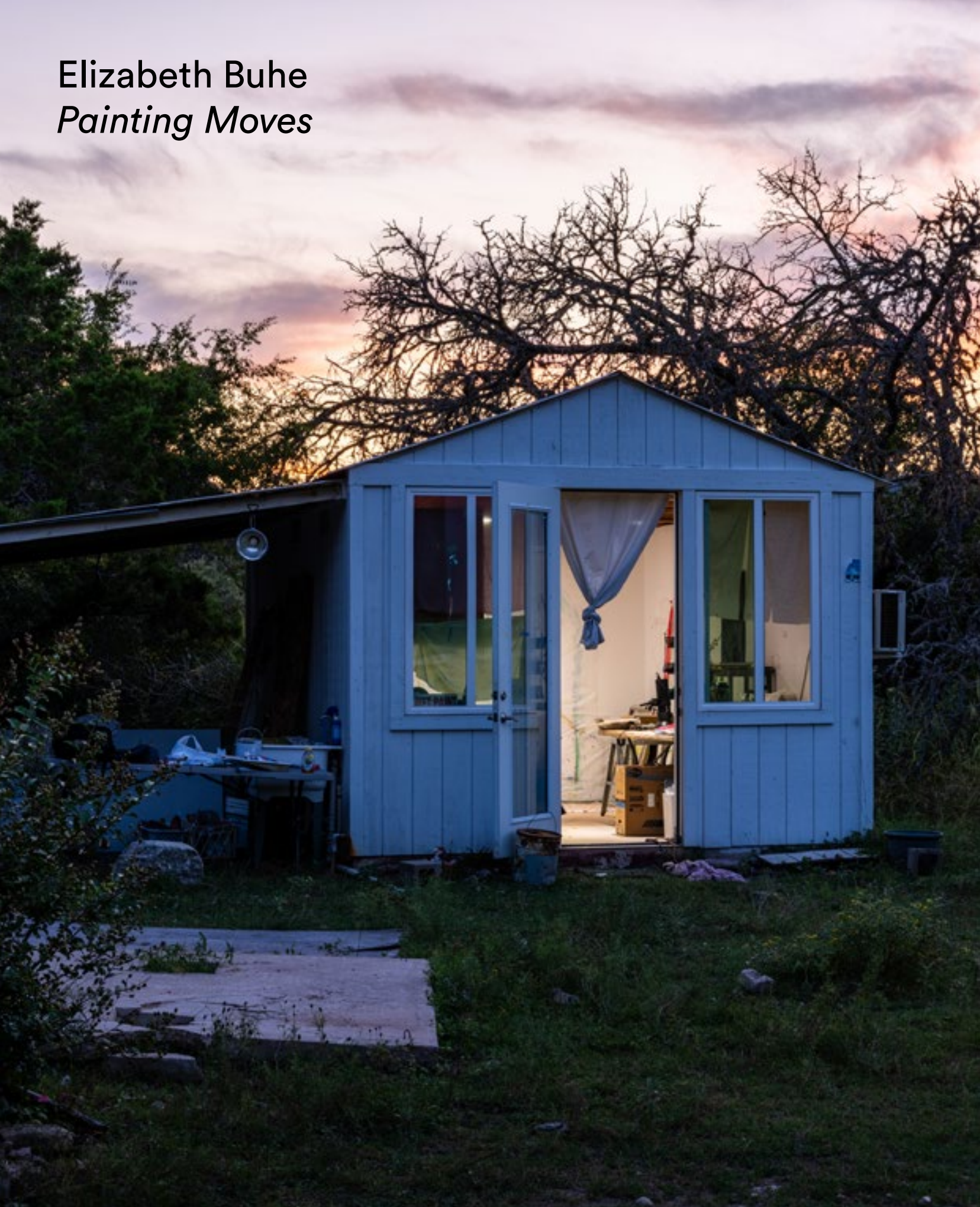


## Elizabeth Buhe *Painting Moves*



In a 2024 interview with *BOMB*, Ada Friedman notes to Alina Tenser that for the past fifteen years she has been concerned with the question, “How can a stationary painting move?”<sup>1</sup> This question is more consequential than it may at first seem, since Friedman’s paintings move both literally (in their making in the studio, and sometimes later in performances before an audience) and *make moves* discursively or hermeneutically (in their reorientation of the hierarchies around media, priority, and authorship that have long haunted the practices of painting and performance). While paintings made of paper with linen and canvas are the focus of the exhibition *Star*, they are but one aspect of Friedman’s far more encompassing conceptual and kinesthetic worldmaking which knits together rituals, iconographies, outside references, and material sedimentation across time and space. In this way, the paintings on view there, all of which Friedman made over the last two to four years, immediately engage a complex temporality. As records of the artist’s performance of making in the studio, they point from our viewing moment back to a recent past; and as entry portals or gaps in the mesh of the everyday world, they point to ever more distant times and places.

Any painting is an index of the marks—Friedman prefers the word “moves”—that an artist makes. But in Friedman’s case, because the performance of making is part and parcel of the work itself, and because not every move she makes marks the canvas, the painting is not simply a record but a crucial actor in Friedman’s private theater of creation wherein she “directs” multiple actors, including herself. *Performance Proposal*, *Pathwork: Ceiling I*,

*Floor 2* (2021–25), with its blocks of mylar and collected fabrics such as the artist’s favorite retired blue jeans arranged in a rectangular form, and its companion pieces *Performance Proposal*, *Pathwork: Ceiling I*, *Floor 2*, 2–4 (2022–25), are exemplary in this regard. The former was constructed initially on the ceiling and then transferred to the floor as well as to the wall. When laid out on the hardwood floor of the artist’s Brooklyn studio, the black end piece comprising one of the painting’s short edges was not yet in place, leaving an open post-and-lintel shape whose negative interior space marked out a path for Friedman’s feet that led her to a fireplace located across from and adjacent to the composition’s opening. Friedman would make marks on the floor work as she paced, stopping at the fireplace to make rainbow-like hatch marks on a canvas page secured above the mantel (fig. 1). To reach it, she would place her hands atop the mantel, which was wrapped in canvas. Upon each circumambulation or “path” the artist also began to transpose into imagery the objects that sat upon the mantel, such as a key, a spoon, and the outline of her hands. Friedman later cut this mantel piece into three, yielding the works on view in *Star*. All four of these artworks were made concurrently through the ritual performance-as-process, whose rules necessitated the making of discrete objects.

As is becoming clear, Friedman moves her own body and her paintings constantly, working them both on the floor and on the wall, and rotating them from front to back. *Performance Proposal*, *Pathwork: Thresholds 4* (2023–25) and *5* (2024–25) are fitted with grommets early-on in the making to facilitate



Fig. 1: Studio view, Brooklyn, New York, 2022

easy hanging and removal. And sometimes, though not in *Star*, Friedman also flips the paintings' position on the wall from recto to verso during the run of an exhibition. This lifting/lowering and flipping/back is part of the performance of making, which entails contending with information that has become hidden on the painting's other side.

Shifting the work in one's mind is another way Friedman moves the paintings. The foundational import of manipulating mindscapes is evidenced by a drawing that inaugurated the Threshold shape: viewed straight on, it looks like an arched doorway; viewed as if from above, it resembles the ringed seats of a Roman theater (fig. 2). Indeed, the foot that kicks out at the bottom of each Threshold canvas collapses the three-dimensional space rendered in this drawing. These physical and mental manipulations of the painting and its imagery during the private performance of making are all ways that the paintings "move."

At the same time, Friedman's works enact a methodological move from the verticality of hierarchy to the horizontality of adjacency. Here our discussion of the orientation of her material operations and physical maneuvers shifts to consider the work as a rebellion against the power structures constantly ingrained in us—from the solitude of authorship and the veracity of science to the assumed virtues of progress, and, relatedly, the ideology of capitalism that accompanies these beliefs. Think, for instance, of the cadence of non-clock time suggested by the hatch marks on that work above the fireplace which record Friedman's ritual pacing in the studio, or her collaboration with a now-deceased poet in the *Helen Rides* paintings and performances from



Fig. 2: *Untitled*, 2018–21

2018–2024. Friedman's practice also enacts a similar leveling within the more proximate discourses of art. Since painting and performance (inclusive of the drawings) are mutually constitutive of one another, painting is not held above another medium. It is, rather, simply part of the flow of creation, which is also punctuated by, say, making further annotations on a drawing, consulting possible moves on her score-like "director's board" (fig. 3), convening with *Star* the cat, or refueling with a piece of fruit.

If Friedman dethrones painting, performance is not held up as superior, either: painting is not rendered an insignificant "material trace" of a lost event. Friedman thus displaces the priority that performance theorists such as Peggy Phelan have long placed on actuality or "being there."<sup>2</sup> Like performance artist Carolee Schneemann, who was trained as a painter, Friedman juxtaposes varied media in time- and site-specific works to realize a shifting scale of physical encounters that, as Schneemann put it relative to her own hybrid work of the 1960s that combined elements of performance, theater, and dance, "exposes us and frees us from a range of aesthetic and cultural conventions."<sup>3</sup>

Friedman disavows "presentness" as a core value, and along with it the modernist investment in a condition of total absorption on the part of the viewer in front of an artwork that requires no duration, narrative, or external content to be experienced. She likewise departs from conventional performance art discourse, for which presentness was also crucial.<sup>4</sup> In Friedman's hands, painting and performance shape each other, and this recalibration is another way Friedman's paintings move. Indeed, for Friedman, "painting" should be understood as a remarkably inclusive and



Fig. 3. *Performance Proposal, Pathwork: Director's Board*, Bridge 3, 2025–26

multi-modal discipline. In this vein, Friedman often deploys the form of the comma in her paintings and drawings, as in the leftmost column of *Performance Proposal, Pathwork: Threshold 4* (side A) (fig. 4) and in two of the works on paper in *Star*. The comma is a common device in parataxis, a writing technique which places separate clauses side by side without conjunctions to indicate equality of ideas, similar to the nonhierarchical *Weltanschauung* Friedman's work proposes.

What does this mean for viewers standing before Friedman's artworks in the gallery? To be sure, the work's ambition exceeds a simple recalibration in our conventional understandings of painting and performance. Yet by recognizing these as checkpoints on our journey to understand Friedman's work, we can better comprehend the paintings as proposals for a broader horizontal movement that is laid across the verticality of existing patterns of thought. Envision, for instance, that the foot paths Friedman forges while making spread out like a web across existing reservoirs of knowledge, covering the totality of that universe with paths she has lived.<sup>5</sup> Like the desire paths that people's footsteps forge in urban infrastructure when they deviate, as Sara Ahmed puts it, "from the paths they are supposed to follow," Friedman's work cuts through vertical thinking.<sup>6</sup> And this is how, so unusually, it exists across time and space, engaging pre-industrial worldviews, ancient means of transmitting culture, folklore, and the movement that her *Bridges* and *Thresholds* imply. Friedman's works are charged with the potential of performance as ritual, showing how ritual can be deployed as a process without claiming its social or spiritual authority.

1. Ada Friedman, "Interview: Ada Friedman by Alina Tenser," *BOMB* (November 20, 2024), accessible online at <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2024/11/20/ada-friedman-by-alina-tenser/>.
2. Peggy Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction" in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 146–66. Carrie Lambert-Beatty critiques Phelan's position in "Documentary Dialectics: Performance Lost and Found," *Visual Resources* 16:3 (2000): 275–85.
3. Schneemann quoted in Anja Foerschner and Rachel Rivenc, "Documenting Carolee Schneemann's Performance Works," *Getty Research Journal* 10 (2018): 170.
4. "Presentness is grace" is the infamous final line of Fried's treatise on modernist painting in "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5 (June 1967): 12–23. Challenges to the binary of "authentic" live art and "secondary" documentation can be found in Amelia Jones, "Lost Bodies: Early 1970s Los Angeles Performance Art in Art History," in *Live Art In LA: Performance in Southern California, 1970–1983*, ed. Peggy Phelan (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 115–84.
5. The last clause is derived from Gaston Bachelard's "Thus we cover the universe with drawings we have lived" in *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 12.
6. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 20. For a corollary argument for horizontality in art history, see Terry Smith, "Allegories of Orientation," in *Horizontal Art History and Beyond: Revising Peripheral Critical Practices*, eds. Agata Jakubowska and Magdalena Radomska (New York: Routledge, 2023), 171–81.

Fig. 4: Detail of side B of *Performance Proposal, Pathwork: Threshold 4*, 2023–25

