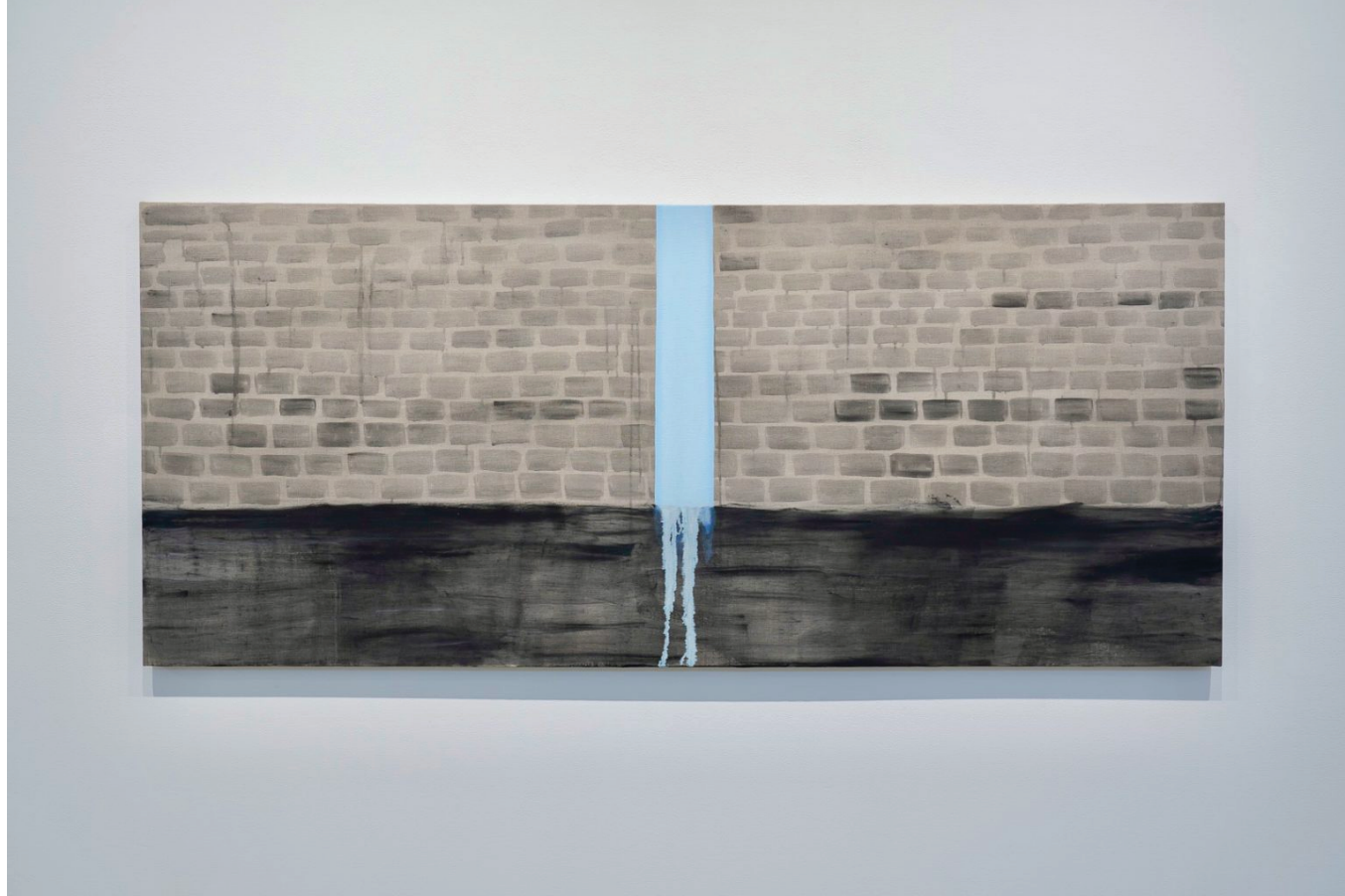


Review: ‘Renee Lai: A Study of Fences’

What does a picket fence conceal from those who have not, and what does it offer those who have?



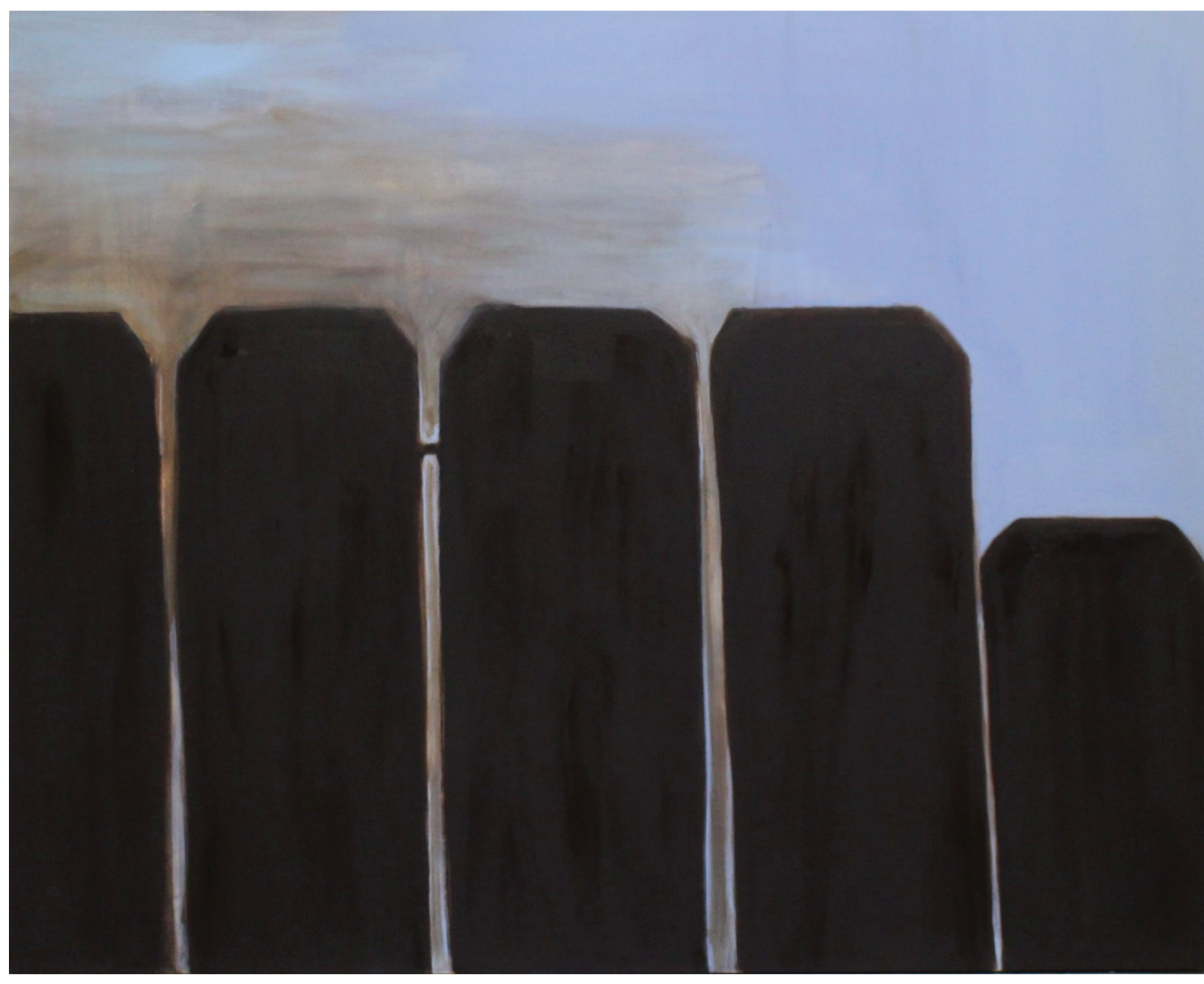
Renee Lai, “Bricks & Blue,” 2020, oil paint and graphite on linen, 36 x 84 inches. 2020. Courtesy grayDUCK Gallery.

By Renae Jarrett - January 18, 2021

Tucked quietly in grayDUCK Gallery, Renee Lai presents subdued and atmospheric paintings in a study of barriers and the social delineations they create between people.

Lai’s mixture of graphite, oil paint, and ink on canvas recalls pre-modern Chinese art styles. The Austin artist uses these practices to suggest a minimalist American suburbia and the idealized white picket fence. Her exhibition, “A Study of Fences,” asks “for what purpose the friendly facade of fresh paint and tidy rows was constructed.”

In the painting “Near and Far,” large blocks of oil paint obscure some amorphous haze that clouds an otherwise bright blue sky. The black shapes recall fencing with as little detail as possible to confirm this.



Renee Lai, “Near and Far,” 2020, oil paint on canvas, 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy Grayduck Gallery

With this minimalist work, Lai tests the boundary of how little pictorial information it takes to signal a barrier, an unknown space blocked off from outside access. Fences often fail to cover the houses they supposedly protect, yet the painting renders a sensation of secrecy. The thick lines of the fence scream “stay out,” but out of what? The artist’s use of haze mirrors the obscurity of the American dream. What does the picket fence conceal from those who have not, and what does it offer those who have?

Elsewhere in the show, Lai’s fences are made up of thin, penciled, and shaky graphite lines. This alternative to the sharp and thick demarcations in other paintings exemplifies the fragility of these barriers. A walk through any suburb in America is a display of wealth through the size of its houses. Small fences act less as a physical obstruction and more as a decorative facade to psychologically signal separateness — me vs. you, us vs. them. These false barriers are thin membranes designed to absorb some and exclude others, with the walls ever-tightening.

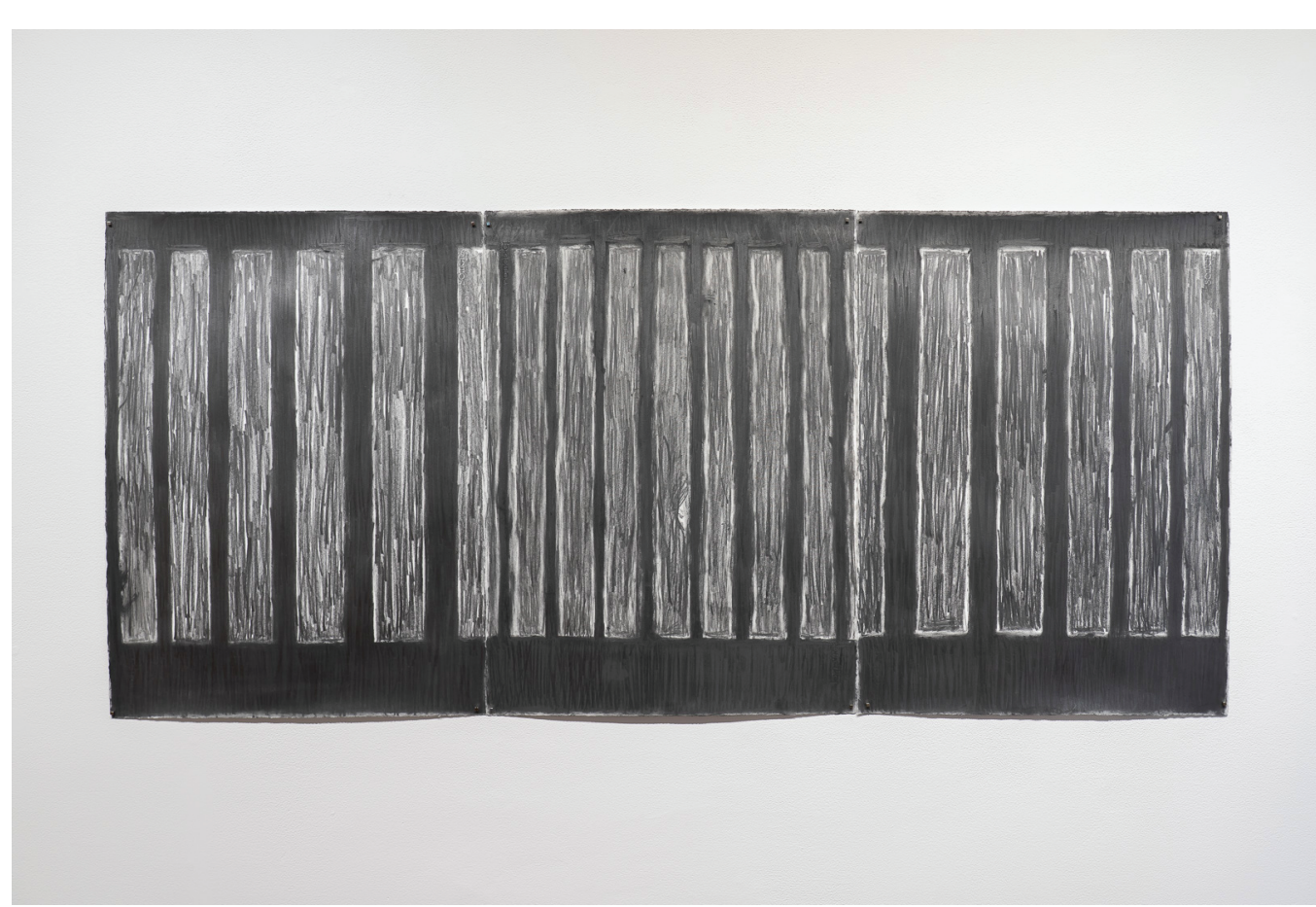


Renee Lai, “Bamboo #2,” 2020, graphite, ink and oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches. Courtesy Grayduck Gallery.

For this exhibition, there are no descriptions nor titles printed on the walls. Viewers without an immediate way into this subject or minimalism as an artistic practice may struggle to parse its meaning.

While the work leaves so much space for the viewer to impose meaning onto it, it does not necessitate an obvious read. Lai’s statement expresses her interest in exploring the varying experiences of barriers both on the canvas and in life. She asks, “what makes one welcome to cross the barrier and what keeps one out?” The artist mimics the art’s content in form by granting access to see from behind a thin and fragile veil of artistic secrecy.

A fence is a powerful metaphor for the opportunity to let others in, but if only we decide to open the gates.



Renee Lai, “Picket Fence Portrait IV,” 2020, graphite on paper, 30 x 66 inches. Courtesy the artist and Grayduck Gallery

No matter how strong a barrier appears, we’ve seen how they offer a false sense of security and fall easily to those who cannot be stopped. Just days before visiting the exhibition, I watched along with the nation as domestic terrorists stormed the U.S. Capitol. I witnessed a mob climb over walls meant to protect the building while they fought in the name of a political platform that ran on erecting a wall at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Meanwhile when actual peaceful protests become violent through police force, Republican officials incite fear of the “other” by purporting that violent riots are caving in on the upper-middle class and coming to a suburb near you. I couldn’t help but wonder as I walked through the gallery why flimsy fences protecting material goods are to be taken any more seriously than the pearly walls meant to protect American democracy.

How can white picket fences save us from the encroachment of ideas rather than things if storming government buildings is no longer out of the question? Lai’s work suggests that impenetrable walls are only fantasies that lulls those within toward comfort while emboldening those left out.

“A Study of Fences” is open by appointment through Feb. 7. A Zoom artist talk will take place 7:30 p.m. Jan. 21. grayduckgallery.com