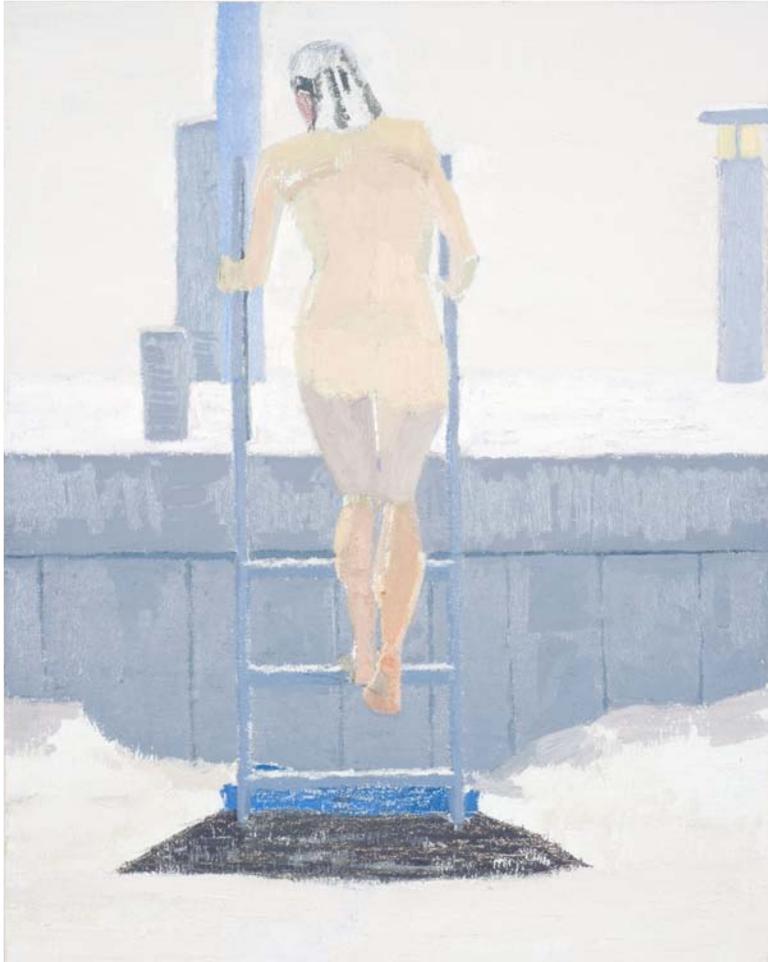




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**MEEHAN**

*ice bather*



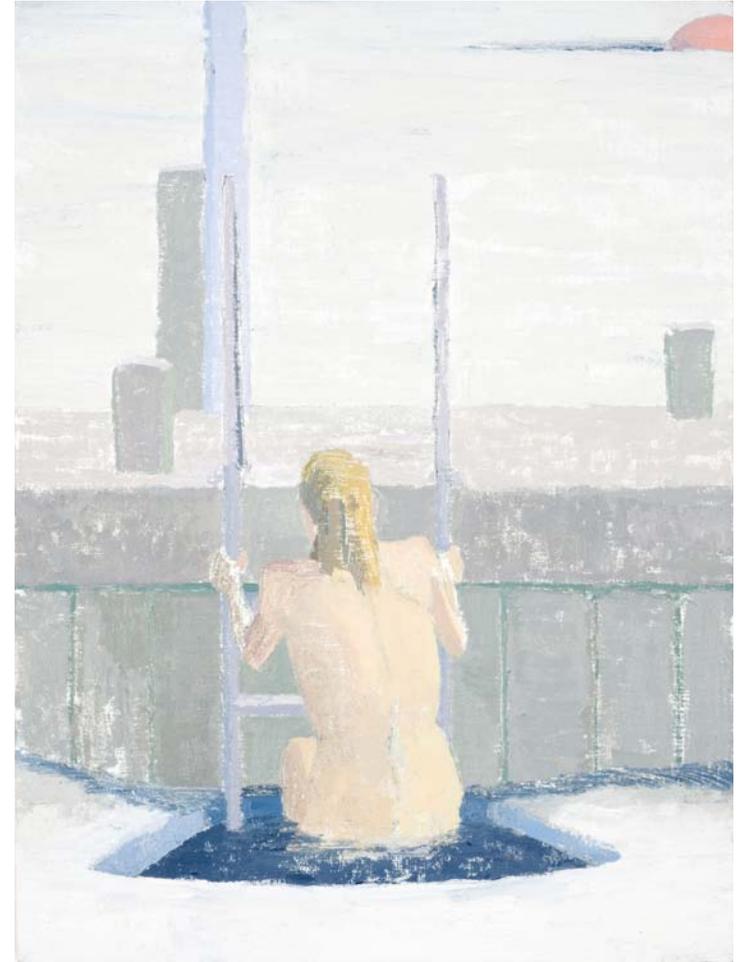
*Ice Bather; Afternoon* / 14" x 11" / oil on linen laid on panel / 2015



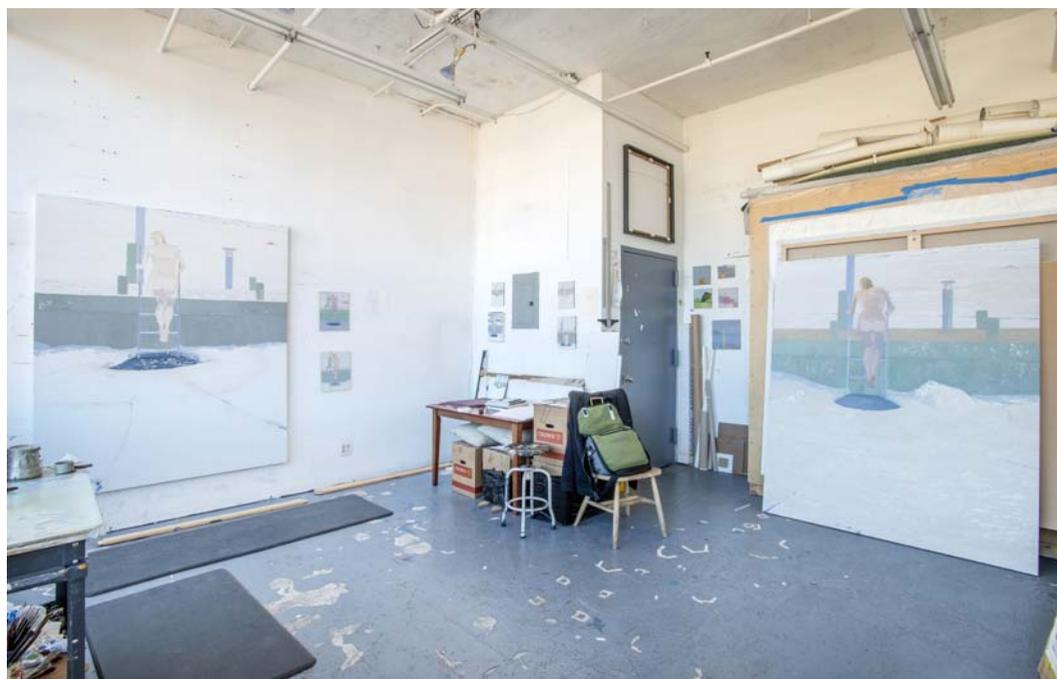
*Ice Bather; Crisp Day* / 14" x 11" / oil on linen laid on panel / 2015



*Ice Bather; Spring Day / 14" x 11" / oil on linen laid on panel / 2015*



*Ice Bather; Immersion / 12" x 9" / oil on linen laid on panel / 2015*



## Under the Ice: Recent Works by Michael Meehan

Of all the serendipitous moments a painter may have, none is perhaps more fruitful than arriving upon the right subject matter. For a painter working representationally, this quality of "rightness" comes about like a powerful reaction - a meeting of instinct, ability and content - in which the artist's individuality and full emotive range manifest with clarity and force. Meehan's most recent series suggests such an origin, centering as it does on the image of a figure in a winter landscape poised to immerse herself into, or perhaps to emerge from, frigid waters flowing beneath a sheet of ice. The motif is taken from the Nordic sauna tradition in which sessions of near-exhaustive heat are interspersed with full-body dips into freezing waters, and the central figure is evidently at the completion point of the cycle, making the difficult plunge. Meehan's new series succinctly conveys the quietly extreme nature of this act, but beyond this literal representation communicates an emotional complexity as only very good figurative painting can do. The female figure at the center of each of these painting is expressive of a nexus of sensations and attributes. She is fragile and powerful, hesitant and determined, and her form within its frozen setting becomes a conduit for reflection on a number of rich and shifting relationships: between self and surroundings, action and reception, and even between the painter to his chosen subject-image.

The perceptual origin of these paintings is central to their impact. Although mostly completed in the studio, they have as their first source drawings done from the artist's own experience of a post-sauna plunge during a winter in Sweden. The acute observation that is so palpable in this series has been an integral component to Meehan's work to date, as is apparent in his meticulous cityscapes, interiors, and un-glamorized still-lives of miscellaneous objects. These subjects are re-visited through multiple iterations, and are almost always informed by series of drawings in which inflections of distance, space and surface are recorded in graphite marks of near-seismographic sensitivity.

In distinction to a "constructed" approach to image making, wherein works are purposefully built-up to the completion of the intended image, Meehan's process is better compared to the casting of a net - in which the nuance of his subject is slowly gathered through the disciplined analysis of the contents of his far-flung gaze. The image's meaning comes about in the making, and its reason for being might not be clear until its countless marks have been accrued.

The drawings done in this series are compelling examples of the process. They carefully stake out the basic structures of dock, ladder and snow with as much intensity as is given to the curves and angles of the figure. Trails of soft marks surrounding the image reveal that the sight-frame of each drawing is calibrated in numerous adjustments throughout the process, and additional paper is sometimes added, not from any sense of design, but to more accurately convey the sensation of space extending from the artist's vantage point. There is an innate gentleness to this approach, even a passivity, as though the subject is met halfway, and left to reveal itself on its own terms. The slightly hunched figure of this scene is consequently starkly presented in all her shivering stoicism, while still retaining the mystery and dignity of her inward-looking focus.

Where the artist has here reserved any pre-intentions toward the subject, a myriad of less direct, less conscious, associations are able to come to the fore. Among these indirect influences is the artist's concern with the act of painting itself. As is often true of the best perceptual works, Meehan's paintings speak of the energies that went into their own creation. It is this subtle relationship of painter to subject that Michael Fried illustrates so concretely in his writing on Courbet. He draws explicit correlations between the flowing hair of his portrait subject and the hair of the paintbrush, for example, or depicted water with the fluidity of paint, and points out mirror gestures between the action of the painter and the painted figure. His particular readings might be considered extreme, but they

are worth keeping in mind in light of the abstract, and admittedly slippery, sensation of there being the “painter in the painting” that is felt so strongly in Meehan’s new works.

The depiction of this wintry scene emanates from such a convincingly embodied vantage point as to make our empathy with the struggle against the extreme cold it expresses absolute. And indeed the cold here is all-pervasive, infusing the colors, rhythms, and even the tightly constructed compositions with its restrained kinetic energy. Stilled tones, from the purest whites and greys to the soft pinks of the bather, combine to convey an unmistakably freezing atmosphere that is alternately crisp and cutting, to heavy and penetrating. In *Ice Bather: Crisp Day*, the effect is brilliant and invigorating, and in *Ice Bather: Dusk* we sense the silence and foreboding of the grey winter sky, pressing down on the figure’s awkwardly bent shoulders. In *Ice Bather: Ascending* the brushstrokes blur and hover, perfectly evoking the subtle mists that occur within the interaction of steam, water and ice – the three physical states incidentally, through which this winter bather must travel. The accuracy with which the sensation of the physical setting is conveyed reminds us that sight is, as far as the acquisition of information is concerned, a form of travel, and painting by extension a means of participation in the landscape complete enough to mimic the experience of full immersion.

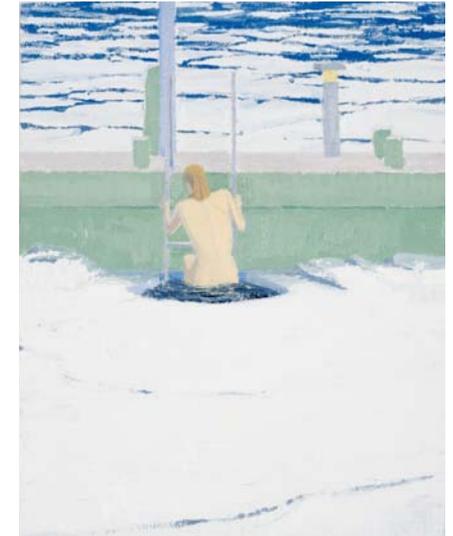
It is through this frigid environment that the artist makes his way to the figure. She is reached indirectly, foregrounded by wavering brushstroke paths traced over the skitterish ice, suggesting layers of space and sensation to be registered before her depiction. There is a palpable tentativeness in the approach,

and a curious parallel is established between the artist’s hesitating treatment and the presumed state of mind of the painted figure, bracing herself for contact either with the ice water or the freezing air on her wet skin.

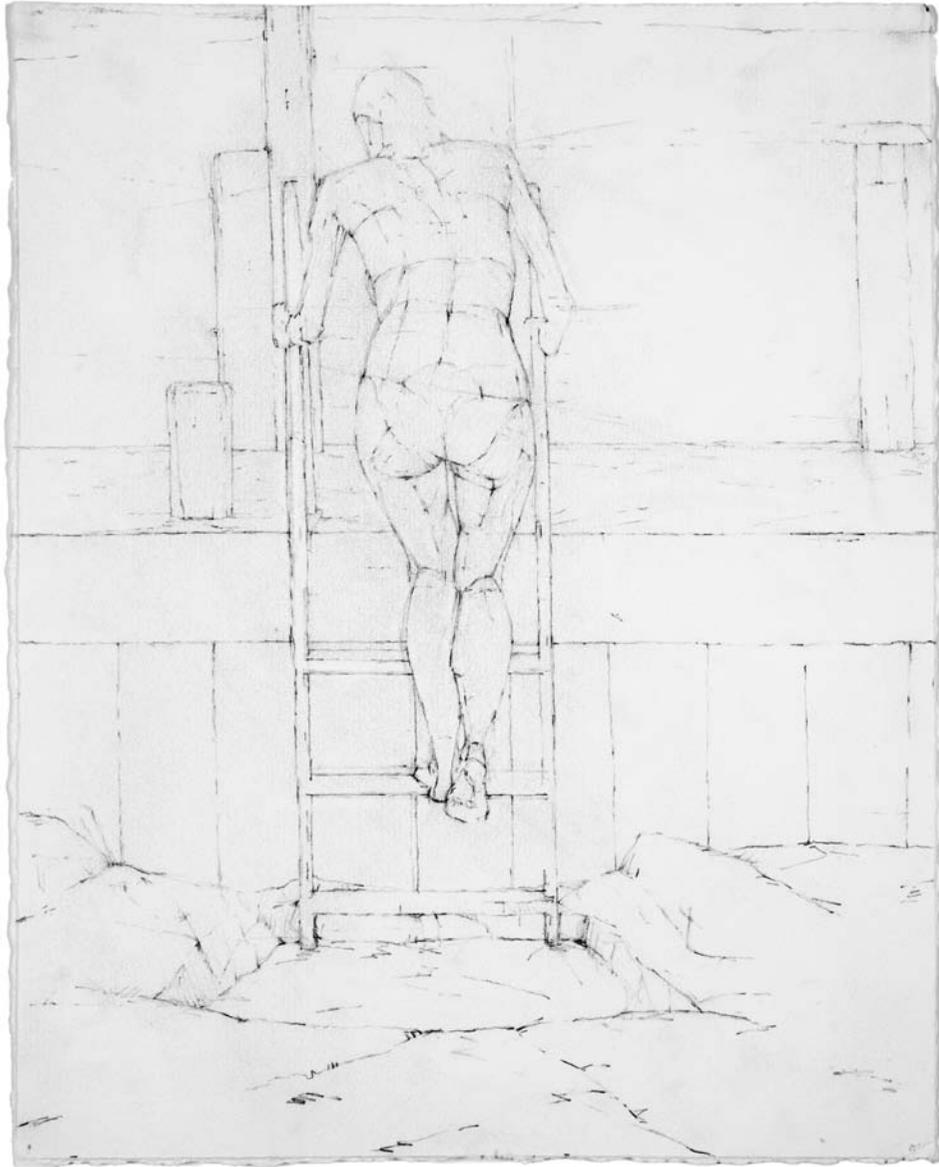
Hesitation, however, is not the full subject, or painterly style, of these paintings. If anything, it is rather the opposite instinct of deliberate surrender to extreme experience. The figure in the image is willingly waiting for full exposure to the elements, making a decision – perhaps the way her painter did in these works – to become a part of the inhospitable landscape. A distinct stoicism is needed for this transformative act, and her slender figure stands as a perfectly expressive vessel within these curiously emotional paintings, that are, in a sense, about the decision not to feel. It is interesting to note that within all the pictorial variations of this series, the woman’s back is always turned, as though the sole communication between muse and painter is one of mute endurance.

One of the more enigmatic works in this series is *Ice Bather: Tentative Step*, in which the ice bather and her winter setting seem to dissolve in part to the white of the canvas beneath. It is as though the artist was not able, either through sight or memory, to gather enough information to keep the image whole. Echoing the snow of the surroundings, the white areas hint at the risk of losing sight of the figure entirely, balanced as she is between the unknown depths beneath the ice at the bottom of the canvas, and the expanse above painted in striations dense with distance. The subtle drama of the unfinished element only emphasizes the stark beauty of the image that remains: the painter’s hard-won subject, fixed in the frozen landscape.

– Christina Kee, Nov 2015



Clockwise from top left: *Ice Bather; Grey Day* / 12" x 9" / oil on linen laid on panel / 2015 | *Ice Bather; Submerging* / 10" x 8" / oil on linen laid on panel | *Ice Bather; Frozen in Time* / 10" x 8" / oil on linen laid on panel / 2014 | *Ice Bather; Ascending* / 10" x 8" / oil on linen laid on panel / 2015



Front cover: *Ice Bather; Tentative Step* / 78" x 62" / oil on linen / 2015  
Back cover: *Ice Bather; Halfway* / 78" x 62" / oil on linen / 2015

Christina Kee is a Brooklyn based painter and arts writer. She is a regular contributor to [artcritical.com](http://artcritical.com), and has appeared several times on the critics' Review Panel hosted by the National Academy. She has written about the work of Jack Bush, Estaban Vicente, Wolf Kahn and Linda Schrank among that of other established and emerging artists.

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