

The plan for *The Balcony* (2025)—Selina Foote's new series of abstract works—began with familiar 19th century paintings. The design does not spring directly from the paintings, but rather, from their reproduction in art books, and from which Selina, through a system of self-prescribed rules, sets out to radically defamiliarise the original image. The formal qualities of line and the use of restricted colour now hold only the barest relation to the originals. And yet, the materiality of painting, lost in the technologies of reproduction, has been retrieved, while also offering a series of images that possess their own (seductive) sovereignty.

If the viewer so desires, small puzzles are waiting to be untangled. Selina provides a hint in the title of the show, *The Balcony*, which leads from Manet (1868) back to Goya (c1808), to illicit affairs and shadowy forms lurking in the dark behind the sunlit Morisot on the balcony. The painting by Manet gripped the thinking of younger artists, as well, such as Magritte (1950). In Selina's painting, *Jeanne* (2025) a formal relation has been forged between the strong lines of Manet's wrought-iron balustrade, to a grid of pronounced vertical lines in the new abstract work. And yet, that would be a simplification, for Selina's web alludes more expansively to debates in European art history around patterning, ornamentation, figuration, and the complexities of mimetic desire.

... And also of scale.

Most of the paintings are predominately small, a little bigger than a face, while two works have larger, torso dimensions. I am borrowing this correlation to the human body to point to the importance of scale in the exhibition. Along with the generosity of space that separates each painting, it means that the exhibition is founded on an ethos of intimacy—visitors to paintings—and resists overwhelming or swamping viewers with painterly conceit. It offers, instead, the opportunity to closely unravel the references that form the substrate of the new works.

As an example, *Argenteuil* (2025) is formed by a tightly patterned surface that utilises the hallucinatory qualities of 'op-art'. The eye is never at rest, skimming across a moving, pulsating surface. Argenteuil was not only a popular location for the soon to be named 'Impressionists'—that group of painters who moved their studios *En plein air* to capture the atmosphere—but also the title of a well-known painting by Manet.

I had the fortune to see this painting at the Prado in Madrid many years ago,¹ to discover, by accident, that the blue Seine of *Argenteuil* (1874) has never been accurately reproduced. As with the actor who never quite replicates the target of their mimicry, the colour of the river in reproductions slips and slides around various shades of blue. The two foregrounded figures that dominate the scene in printed reproductions, are overpowered by the intense vibrancy of the original painting's turquoise waters. I relay this personal story only to highlight that the colour blue is a central concern of Selina's *Argenteuil* and, also, to underline the close and expansive thinking that goes into each of her paintings: "The colours are all mixed to match the reproductions as best I can by eye. But *Argenteuil* is mostly cobalt blue with the background being mostly white with a tiny bit of red oxide so it's slightly warmer." [Selina by text, 13 August].

We know the story. In our part of the world European painting comes to us first in art books. It is only later, if we are lucky, that we come face to face with the originals. Selina's paintings speak directly to this state of secondary consumption. Since the source for Selina's *Argenteuil* was a reproduction, her method draws attention to the way a printed or digital version of a painting is always its other. What is found in the newly formed works is the preservation of the qualities of materials—the expressiveness of the paint, the delineating ways of the graphite, the feel of paint on canvas...

Jan Bryant, August 2025

¹ Édouard Manet (1832–1883) *Argenteuil* (1875) Oil on canvas, 148.5 cm x 114.5 cm, on loan from the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tournai for the *Manet at the Prado* exhibition, 2003–04, Prado, Madrid, Spain.