JANE DICKSON
All That Is Solid Melts Into Air
January 16 – February 17, 2019

James Fuentes is pleased to present Jane Dickson, All That Is Solid Melts Into Air. The exhibition includes works spanning from the early 1980s to the present, each offering an important document of New York City.

Jane Dickson is known for her vivid depictions of Times Square’s nocturnal energy. Born in Chicago, Dickson arrived to New York in 1977, and a year later began a job programming visuals for Times Square’s first digital billboard. She mostly worked the night shift and was responsible for the New Year’s Eve countdown, witness to upturned faces basking in the hallucinatory glow. Two years later she moved to an apartment on 43rd Street and 8th Avenue, where she lived and raised two children with her husband. From this vantage point Dickson observed Times Square after dark, absorbing the seductive haze and structured environment in which figures and shadows moved.

Dickson soon began to carry around a small, discrete camera as a way to record fleeting episodes. Many of these impressionistic photographs contain a rich field of dark blackness, punctuated by effervescent neon signs, the glow of a cigarette being lit, the fluorescent insides of a storefront, or the reflection of rain against the streets. As well as her snapshots, Dickson also made rough charcoal sketches describing the posture of figures—rushing, waiting, a young man being frisked, the shape of a cop on a horse—and this very gesture of peering over a ledge, looking in, like the artist. As much documentary as they are voyeuristic, these are the details that fill Dickson’s paintings. Since the 1980s, starting at Times Square, she has chronicled and memorialized scenes of life in America, from the glittering spectacles of Las Vegas casinos and demolition derbies, to the monotony of strip malls, highways, and suburban sprawl. In Dickson’s own words, “I paint to locate baseline reality within an unstable world.”

As well as being a deeply-rooted observer of New York’s street life, Dickson is an important part of the city’s creative history, involved in connecting the downtown art and punk scenes to uptown graffiti and hip-hop subcultures. During her time working on the Spectacolor billboard she invited peers—including Jenny Holzer, Keith Haring, and David Hammons—to make animated works for it, initiating a program that ran many years after she left the job. While working with her husband, Charlie Ahearn, on the production of the seminal hip-hop film Wild Style, Dickson was exhibiting at FUN Gallery as well as Fashion Moda of the South Bronx, and was an early member of the downtown collective Colab. In 1980 Colab and Fashion Moda collaborated to present The Times Square Show, a watershed exhibition that combined the visual, music, and performance cultures of uptown and downtown in the setting of an abandoned Times Square massage parlor.

Dickson is currently included in the major survey exhibition, East Village NY: Vulnerable and Extreme at the Seoul Museum of Art. Dickson has exhibited at venues including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New Museum, Jewish Museum, The Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, Creative Time, The Hirshhorn Museum, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Art Institute of Chicago, and Kunsthalle Vienna. Her work is included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum, the Whitney, the National Portrait Gallery, the Brooklyn Museum, Jewish Museum, Art Institute of Chicago, Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, and the Walker Art Center, among others. She is a recipient of the Joan Mitchell Award, and in 2008 she was commissioned by MTA to produce a permanent artwork for Times Square Station. All That Is Solid Melts Into Air follows the 2014 exhibition, The Real Estate Show at James Fuentes.
Jane Dickson, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*. January 16–February 17, 2019
Big Peepland, 2016. Oil on linen. 70 x 44 inches
Dreams, 2018
Oil stick on linen
24 x 18 inches
Peep, 1992-96
Oil and pumice on canvas
57 x 40 inches
Employees Only, 2000
Oil stick on linen
50 x 30 inches
Cops in Headlights, 1991
Oil on linen
50 ½ x 36 inches
Witness, 1991-97
Oil and Rolotex on canvas
48 x 30 inches
Mother and Child, 1985
Oil stick on linen
80 x 40 inches
Nathans 43rd Street, 1984-86. Oil on canvas. 66 x 78 inches
Bus Stop Boy, 1984
Oil stick on canvas
70 x 34 inches
The first time I saw Jane Dickson’s work was at the *Times Square Show* in 1980. I was living in a loft nearby in the garment district, and it all made sense to me. The exhibit was organized by Co-lab, an art collective gathering disenfranchised young artists interested in politics and pop culture. A lot of my friends were Co-lab people. Jane was one of the shows co-organizers. She made the poster for the show, a man’s hand holding a three card monte, together with Charlie Ahearn, whom she married three years later. It was a wild exhibit and a cultural landmark, with all kinds of prints, cartoons and graffiti going up and down the stairs of the empty building. Way at the top, Jane had a little painting of a hooker’s feet in red heels surrounded by drawings of couples in bed. It was the beginning of her “life’s work.”

A few months later Jane and Charlie moved to a loft on 43rd Street and 8th Avenue. Jane went on to organize and contribute work to the *Money Show*, the *Dog Show*, and the *Two-Suitcase Show*, which all sought to break out of the narrow confines of the art world. And ultimately, of course, fed back into the art world. Since, she has had a number of one-person shows, from Fashion Moda in the South Bronx to the Whitney Museum at Philip Morris, and her work is now in the collections of MoMA, the Chicago Art Institute and the Walker Art Center, among others.

We had dinner at Barocco between Church and White—a most unlikely place to talk about life on 42nd Street, a fancy Tribeca restaurant. We sampled French wines, we reminisced about France, and this impossible dream: being an American. It’s always fun meeting with Jane. Especially with a microphone between the plates.

So do you think you’re wild?

*Jane Dickson* Well I am in my work. Sometimes people are disappointed that I don’t look more like my subjects. I hide that part.

*SL* I was wondering about that. If someone were to look at your work and derive a psychological portrait of you, do you think that would reflect what you actually are?

*JD* Absolutely. All my paintings are psychological self-portraits. Whatever bothers me, confuses me, provokes strong mixed emotions, I have to paint to clarify. Right now I want to paint Los
Angeles because on some levels it’s incredibly attractive and on other levels it’s a nightmare: a perfect paradox.

SL Are you saying that a portrait of you would be a portrait of ambivalence and confusion?

JD It would be a complicated portrait.

SL You lived in France for a while, and then you decided France was not your thing. It wasn’t troubled enough for you?

JD Not that it wasn’t troubled enough, but I felt like I had my nose pressed against the glass and I was looking at this culture from the other side. It wasn’t my culture.

SL It was like an exhibition.

JD Exactly, and I need to work from what’s part of me. I grew up in America. That’s part of who I am. But I also spent a lot of time in France, where my mother lives, and England, where my father’s parents lived. It became important for me to be American, unlike them. Defining “American” became a goal. It still is.

SL Becoming American was a problem in that it was something you wanted, rather than already being immersed in.

JD My father was Scottish by origin, but then his family moved to England and changed their name to sound British. One of his parents was Catholic and the other was Protestant—which was a really big deal where they came from—so I always felt like my father never knew who he was. My mother’s family were German Jewish pioneers who lived in New Orleans and fought for the South in the Civil War. Then they lived in Nebraska, and in Alaska during the gold rush, places you wouldn’t imagine Jews. Finally they moved to Chicago, then my mother moved to France when I was fourteen.

SL If you had stayed in France would you have painted landscapes?

JD I can admire landscapes and flowers, I just don’t have anything to say about them. It’s things like Times Square, demolition derbies, strippers, suburban homes, malls, and children watching T.V. that intrigue me. Lately I’ve been focusing on the ideas of ambition and home. These are all issues I find complicated and problematic.

SL But you put together suburban homes and 42nd Street. They don’t seem to belong to the same universe.

JD Oh, come on. Who do you think goes to 42nd Street? Lots of people who live in the suburbs. They compartmentalize their lives: the wife and kids in the suburbs; fucking boys and girls in Times Square.

SL So you put two and two together.

JD Sure. It’s a scrambled up mess and that’s what’s interesting. Our natural inclination is to clarify: Is he good or is he bad? Is he moral or immoral? Is she clean or dirty? Nothing is like that. We’d like it to be, but everything is some weird gray mix.

SL You feel American because it’s all mixed up?

JD Yeah.

SL It’s like you’re an outsider from the inside, whereas most people are just there. That’s what I felt when I saw your PEEPLAND show at the Long Beach Museum in California. It was like looking down from your window, turning your home into a peep show.

JD The show was a turning point for me. It presented a decade of paintings, which I had never seen all together before. The year before, right as PEEPLAND opened at its first venue, Illinois State University, I broke my painting wrist. So I was literally forced to stop and contemplate what I had done so far.

SL It’s always good when something breaks down. You must have been relieved.

JD Frustrated and relieved. For a decade each body of work had grown out of the previous one, then suddenly it all felt equally accessible. It paralyzed me. My hair fell out. I finally got moving again by making little paintings of any idea I could think of, sort of a visual encyclopedia of my world. I had been
working with a very limited palette for several years. I was color starved. As I put out all the colors, I felt like someone had given me a huge box of fancy chocolates and I was sampling all of them. It felt gloriously self-indulgent.

SL How did you discover PEEPLAND to start with?

JD First I got a job on the night shift designing computer animation for the billboard at One Times Square. Then we got a loft on 43rd Street. I started to paint what I saw on the street, in bars, in the subway. At one point Guy Trebay did a series on Times Square and the Voice asked me to illustrate it. The last week he was writing about the Melody Burlesque, and they said, “Go to this strip club.” I’d never been to a real strip club before. I went, took pictures, and did drawings. I got such weird, strong reactions from people.

SL When was that?

JD It was the early ’80s. As a young woman drawing strippers, people totally confused me with the work. They were like, “Oh, you’re drawing sex workers, well then, you must want me to fuck you.”

SL It was like a come on.

JD It was a bit overwhelming, even after Hey Honey, Wanna Lift?

SL Your book?

JD That book was pick up lines. I came to New York in my mid-twenties: young women get a lot of weird attention that they’re not necessarily looking for. So for a while I took notes and made cartoons of all the pick up lines I was getting. All dicks.

SL There was also an element of voyeurism and transgression in the work. The peep shows were both a representation of your own position and that of the artist. The message was all in the gaze.

JD I’m not trying to tell you the objective truth. I see a reflection of what I’m thinking about in certain subjects. And I think if I can capture it in just this way, I can make it clear to you too. We’re talking about sex, but for years my Times Square work was primarily about loneliness and anticipation. They’re all solitary figures. If there’s more than one figure, they’re eyeing each other from an unbridgeable distance.

SL You were a witness to both.

JD I was single and I was young. I was waiting for my life to start, and I was interested in looking at people who were hanging out and just waiting—waiting to turn a trick, or pick up a trick, sell drugs, or whatever. That seemed like a profound position to me. I was a witness, but I wasn’t only documenting what was happening to them. It resonated with my own experience.

SL What’s out in the street is really what’s most private.
JD Yes. Right now I’m thinking about a series of people watching television, which is also very private. People in their homes, relaxed and feeling safe. The earlier stuff was about people acting out their personal melodramas on the street, mostly because they didn’t have the luxury of being at home.

SL Television is another peep show.

JD In a way it’s even more private than sex. People get this great slack jaw, their bodies turn into rubber. My earlier work has been described in voyeuristic terms. At first I wanted to be a fly on the wall because other people’s lives seemed more real than mine. I’m not too interested in theater, in conscious posing. I want reality, the unselfconscious gesture, although actually a lot of my street work is posed: like in *Paradise Alley*, the couple is really Kiki [Smith] holding up Charlie [Ahearn]. I had seen a couple on the street: he was staggering, she was trying to hold him up. I made a quick sketch, but it didn’t have enough detail, so I posed friends down my stairs and took snapshots. The *Witness* paintings were the same. I asked friends with second story apartments to pose at their windows, because I couldn’t catch my neighbors in The Times Square Hotel unaware. My neighbors and I had a peek-a-boo game going: they were trying to see what was going on in my room, but they didn’t want me to look at them; I was trying to see what was happening in their room, but I didn’t want them looking at me.

SL That’s not voyeurism. Voyeurism is always a one-way street.

JD I wanted to see and to know without being seen and known. It’s this primordial predator/prey response. To be seen is to be eaten. If you’re being watched unknown, you’re in mortal danger.

SL It seems like you’re watching something very big, archetypal. Something that is hidden, that has a secret. You were looking into someone’s window.

JD I wanted to address the idea of watching, and these new works of watching television are pursuing the idea even further. It seems to be an integral key to being American.

SL It’s a direct window on the culture.

JD It’s certainly there to enhance our fear of everything.

SL Did you have children when you lived on 42nd Street?

JD They were both born there. We moved downtown four years ago, when they were getting old enough to ask questions.

SL I thought you moved to the office on 42nd Street because you wanted to have no domestic life.

JD That’s true.

SL But you had kids then.

JD Yet another paradox. I want it all.

SL Why do you like paradoxes? Turning the table on people and subjects?

JD It’s not that I like paradox, but I find it to be the crux of my existence. I tried for a long time to reconcile things within myself, but then I just gave up. I can want to go to strip clubs, and I can want to be a mother. I don’t have to choose between the two. The world may want me to choose, but I refuse.

SL The beauty of paradoxes is that you don’t have to make up your mind. You had a non-domestic domestic life.

JD Now I live down in Tribeca where I have a real domestic life, and that leaves me more energy to be adventurous in my work because I’m not dealing with the daily adversity of life in Times Square.

SL To be adventurous for you is to paint suburban houses.

JD For the moment it is. I want to see where the edge in bland is. The suburban houses are a prelude to going to L.A. They’re about L.A., but seeing as I’m here at the moment, I’ve gone to New Jersey instead.

SL You already said that the suburban houses connected to 42nd Street. Now 42nd Street is of course becoming suburban. Recently in the *New York Times* they talked about people strolling with their kids there.
JD  My old building was condemned to make way for that.
SL  Maybe 42nd Street moved back to the suburbs where it belongs.
JD  Maybe. I’m curious about those country strip clubs. There aren’t so many suburban strip clubs, but once you get out into the sticks there are weird strip clubs again. Although I’m actually tired of focusing on sex. Right now, I’m dealing with carpet samples. They come in all these different color-coordinated shades. I am interested in the idea of home and trying to create a home. A single family home is still the American ideal. We don’t like to share. Even if you live in a little, bitty apartment in the city you think of it as your castle. If the people upstairs are making noise, you feel like, How dare you intrude on my privacy? The single family home is not so much a symbol of suburbia, but of each person’s individual castle that they don’t have to share. “Home” hits so many nerves. I’ve barely scratched the surface yet.
SL  If you look backwards, when you were dealing with the underbelly of America, it was a way of dealing with suburbia. So you haven’t changed your topic at all.
JD  Right. It was my suburban dad who took me to the Playboy club when I was a kid. (laughter) He thought that was a good evening’s entertainment with his daughter.
SL  That sounds quite Oedipal.
JD  We had a very Oedipal relationship. He had businesses in Alaska and Florida so he commuted back and forth between Anchorage and Miami.
SL  Between being a pioneer and being a retired man.
JD  He was involved in an airline that flew to the dewline in Alaska during the Cold War when we still had those stations that were listening to the Soviets.
SL  And your paintings offer an aerial view of the things you participate in.
JD  Oh my God, is that related to my dad too?
SL  Well, I’m just trying to follow up this track. It doesn’t mean it’s a very fruitful one. Oedipus only becomes interesting when you push it a bit.
JD  Actually, having a father who commuted from Alaska to Miami reflects a certain ambivalence or indecisiveness too.
SL  On his part?
JD  Uh huh. Also, he converted to Judaism while he was married to my mother. Then he converted to Greek Orthodox with his second wife.
SL  And your mother? Did she convert to something else?
JD  She converted to France. (laughter) My children ask, “What religion are we?” And I say, “Well your mom’s a lot of things and your dad is Catholic.” “So are we Catholic?” they ask. And I say, “Well we haven’t had you baptized, so no you’re not Catholic.” “So what are we?” “Well, I don’t know, so how do you expect to know?”
In your painting there’s a strong Catholic sensibility. Was there something about the church related art in France that struck you? Your last *peepland* work was about saints and sacrifice and martyrs. How did you get turned on to these images of sacrificial suffering? That’s what the demolition derby pictures seem to be about too. A kind of potlatch.

The demolition derby is absolutely ritual sacrifice. Most of the people who drive the cars in demolition derbies are people who spend the week fixing cars. The impulse to destroy the cherished object is so powerful. I can relate to that.

What would you destroy of your cherished objects if you had a choice? Would you destroy your art?

I do that fairly frequently. (*laughter*)

Is it the sacrifice that turns you on? Or is it the tension between something that’s experienced and something that you have to give up, or destroy? Maybe it is a way of energizing things through conflicting, paradoxical conjunctions.

The latter I think. My work doesn’t portray the moment of climax, whether it’s sexual or destructive. The implication is more interesting than the denouement. Sex films are always incredibly boring.

Giorgio de Chirico painted these moments where it looked as if something was about to happen, like a sense of immanence. Your paintings are not really about the climax, but the tension leading up to it.

When you don’t know what’s going to happen: Is the car going to blow up? Are they going to fuck? Italo Scanga did a whole series of work in the early ’80s called *Fear of Buying a House*, where there were these wooden figures holding little glass houses. I love the idea that he was making art that was a list of fears. Like Jenny Holtzer’s saying “Protect me from what I want.” What you want is what you fear the most.

What is fear? Another kind of entertainment?

Entertainment is all about promising to satisfy your desire, then usually frustrating it. Maybe this is universal. It’s certainly true for me, but I’m afraid to want anything because if I want it then I might be deprived of it.

You may be stuck with it.

I’m in danger either way. Desire engenders fear.

And fear desire.

Desire is an end in itself. The state of anticipation is a somewhat pleasurable state. Then your chances are two out of three that whatever you desire, the fulfillment will not be a happy one.

So consumerism consumes. If you satisfy your desire then you’re consumed. If you don’t satisfy it, then you just maintain dissatisfaction. There’s no way out.

Consumer society is based on the idea of inflaming desire. We’re all running around constantly in heat. There are always things in your face going, “Look at this. Don’t you want it?”

So we are inflamed creatures?

I think so. It’s this impossible state. For the brochure for *Saints Grow Up*, Linda Yablonsky wrote a whole series of excuses. They’re an integral part of my life. Excuses are a way to side step this dilemma of desire, because they give me the option to want something, then not act on it. So I can maintain this position of yearning and anticipation without having to move towards the fulfillment, whether it be positive or negative.

Your work is not really about suspension, but about contemplation of the suspension and reflection upon it. Maybe that’s why it goes further than you do. (*laughter*)

Well that’s always true. I’ll find a subject and think there’s something to explore, and it’s only long after I have made the
paintings that I’ll realize what they are about. Like when I
started doing the series of revelers on New Year’s Eve in Times
Square. On one level these paintings were about the end of the
‘80s party, on the other they were about connections—drunken
people falling over each other, leaning on each other, dragging,
pushing each other. I started doing those pieces when I had
children. Suddenly I had this family I had to learn to connect
with.

SL You’re interested in architecture. But what you’re studying is
the architecture of fear.

JD I’d like to think it wasn’t just fear, but fear and pleasure. In
everything I do I want you to feel both ways about it.

SL You mean going back to the paradox and turning the table.
You don’t get to the pleasure without getting to the fear and you
don’t get to fear without getting to the pleasure. Maybe that’s
what a Moebius strip is, and what stripping is about.

JD It’s a perfect metaphor. I hadn’t thought of it as a Moebius
strip, but I certainly do think my work has come full circle, in a
way I’m back to the beginning.

SL And so are we. But the tension that you’re looking for
doesn’t have to be resolved. It just gets you on a trip, and the
connection between the two is what is important. People think
that weekend and carnival are entertainment time, the
pleasuring time, but there is more work and more anguish in
pleasure than there is in fear. There are no weekends for
American culture.

JD I think that is a beautiful summation.

SL But one of the reasons for art is to take us beyond that
circle. There’s something really ominous as well about the
derby paintings, these cramped suburban homes, like Mayan
ruins or a cosmic catastrophe. They connect to something
bigger, like David Wojnarowicz’s work. It’s another kind of fear.
At bottom fear is very cosmic. It’s a way of making people
belong to a culture, for better or for worse.

JD When David and I met we immediately recognized some
kindred spirit and stayed friends. David was really honest. I
respected that. He was trying to look at and voice what was
going on. I respect political work. My work is socially conscious,
but I’m not polemical because I’m too ambivalent. Like when I
started spending time in strip clubs again, I thought, these
women are being exploited and it’s terrible. Then I realized it’s
more complicated than that. The traditional feminist line is only
part of the story. There is power in having a young, gorgeous
body and going, “Check it out. Eat your heart out. I’ve got it and
I’m going to flaunt it.” It’s a limited power, but it is a power. It’s
something to celebrate, not just wag your finger at. It’s sexy. It
can be degrading. It can be dangerous. If you talk to women
who are stripping they always say we’re the exploiters, not the
exploited. That may not be the full story, but it’s part of it.

When I did *Hey Honey, Want a Lift?* women universally found it
hilarious, and men, most of the time, found it really disturbing. It
made them angry. I would have guys, total strangers, come up
to me and say, “How dare you put your personal neurosis out in
public.” The idea that a woman might not be looking at a man
with his pants down and a hard on with anything less than total
awe and love, that he might also look ridiculous and absurd, was really upsetting and threatening to a lot of men. Women have eons of experience at being treated as sex objects, being scrutinized in frequently dispassionate ways.

SL I've never thought your work was really sexual, because sex can be such a small way of looking at things. But fear is political. Fear is never personal. It's a universal ambiance that you appropriate for yourself. And that's really what holds the whole society together. That's why you have boredom. That's why you have entertainment. Horror films and roller coasters. Surfing the black hole. The underbelly of sex is fear.

JD I am more interested in this range between the seductive and repulsive. But it doesn't have to be sexual. Now I'm focusing on the non-sexual parts of the body. With the strippers, first I drew them in this creamy oil stick on abrasive extra-coarse sandpaper. When I painted them on carpet, a friend said that the surface made him cringe because it reminded him of dirty bath mats, paint globs clogging the carpet pile. I love that.

SL The grittiness establishes another relationship between the 42nd Street paintings and your suburban scenes. They all belong to the same continuum.

JD That's how I experience it. I've just made a show at Tyler School in Philadelphia called Saints Grow Up. When you enter the space—all painted bright yellow—you face four central columns. Each column is a giant child’s arm raised, calling for attention. On the reverse side of the columns are giant adult arms hanging down. With little plush carpet homes all around the walls. It has a soundtrack by Margaret Dewys of traveling sounds, cars and planes like you’re in a Queens backyard. I’d say the same thing about these giant hands on carpet. The arms are twelve feet tall and the houses only two feet square. It’s like Alice in Wonderland. I can be king in this tiny realm, but I’ll have to relinquish the rest of the world because that scale of ambition couldn’t fit in these houses. I love that image of Alice when she takes the second drink and gets really huge and is cramped in this little house with one arm sticking out the window. It reminds me of Bachelard’s talking about the house as symbolic of the face. It’s the face you’re presenting to the world. The door is the mouth, and the windows are the eyes, and we’re stuffed inside trying to get out.

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