

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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# The Guardian

Amie Siegel's Strata review – from the depths of the Earth to the heights of excess  
4 / 5 stars



Vermont's finest... Amie Siegel, *Quarry*, 2015. Photograph: Andy Stagg

**Amie Siegel follows marble from quarry to tasteful, lifeless New York apartments. What will her cryptic excavations turn up?**

Amie Siegel's HD videos and films are rich, complex affairs. They slow you down. In her largest British show to date, the American artist fills the South London Gallery with recent works. The camera burrows deep underground, between fissures and sunken lakes lit in greenish light. Neptune, from Gustav Holst's Planets suite, accompanies us as we go down into the world's deepest underground quarry, in Vermont. Then comes the heavy machinery clawing at the stone, great blocks sliding on a slurry of broken and pulverised rock. Glimpsing a worker, we suddenly understand the shocking scale and volume of the caverns. Flywheels spin and terrifyingly dangerous machinery saws the stone, hollowing out the mountain with a whining, shrieking roar.

Now all you can hear is the hum of the air-conditioning in an empty apartment. The camera sweeps along a marble kitchen worktop. The hob, like a low industrial complex, interrupts the level plain. It has never seen spilt soup or a spatter of pasta sauce. Further along, you can botanise among the orchids and lilies in their massive pots, every bloom coiffed, no leaf or petal out of place. This is beginning to creep me out.

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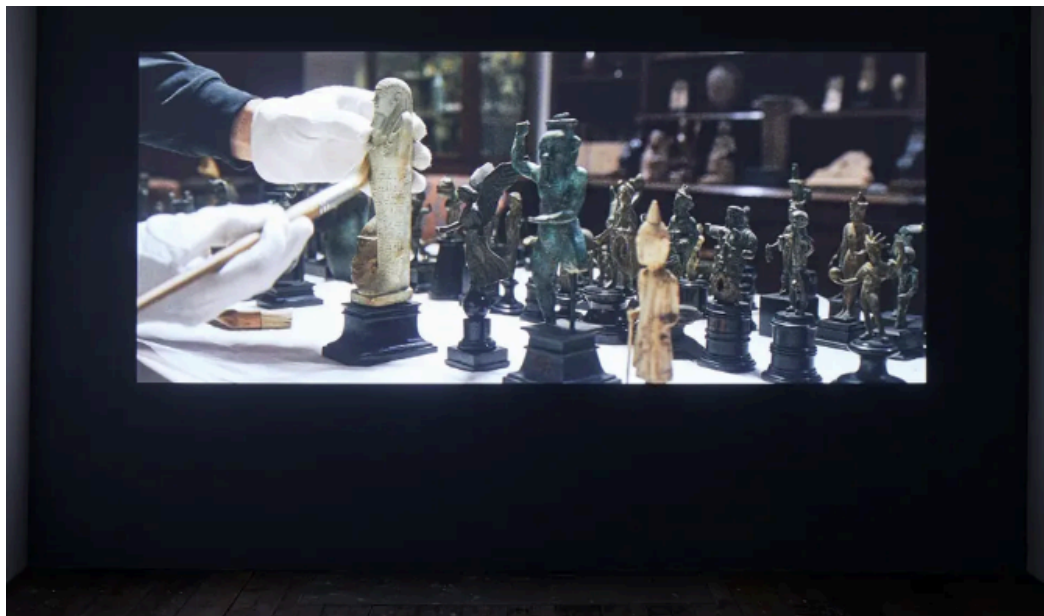
More things slide in and out of view, expensive objects passing by as though on a conveyor belt. Sometimes whiteness fills the big screen in the darkened gallery, a blankness alleviated by the stray pockets of impurity – silica, iron, chert and sand – veining and curdling the polished surfaces. Our eyes do the surface wiping.

A Brice Marden abstraction hoves into view as we pass through another room. At the end of a corridor, a small Rothko sits under a light. A door suddenly opens and we catch a glimpse of a janitor or cleaner, someone rummaging about on the other side of the wall. We roam with the camera, dwell on a geometry of magazines and books stacked on a low table. Slowly, disjunctions accumulate with an increasing sense of unreality.

As the camera wanders round the furniture, the views through the windows do not shift: there's no parallax, no sense of a changing view. Whatever is out there – the piers and the New Jersey shore, the distant Statue of Liberty, the streets of Chelsea down below – are becalmed for ever. Is it a real window or a photographic simulation? You keep wanting to go back, to rewind and look for clues, to find the seams and slippages. The more you look, the more there is to see, even though the sheen of things is unchanging. No dust hangs in the air. This place feels haunted by its own emptiness.

The cinematography is somehow both forensic and voyeuristic. Siegel's view is a cold sexology of surfaces. Seen from the precipice of the kitchen counter, the chevron pattern of the hardwood floor marches away to infinity, while a marble rolling pin sitting on a marble slab becomes a possible weapon for some future domestic stand-off. An indoor pool swirls with light. Long tracking shots interlace with slide-show views and closeup stills. The lights go on in a building that turns out to be an architectural model standing in a room. Real rooms and doll's house designer fantasies collide, amplifying the unreality.

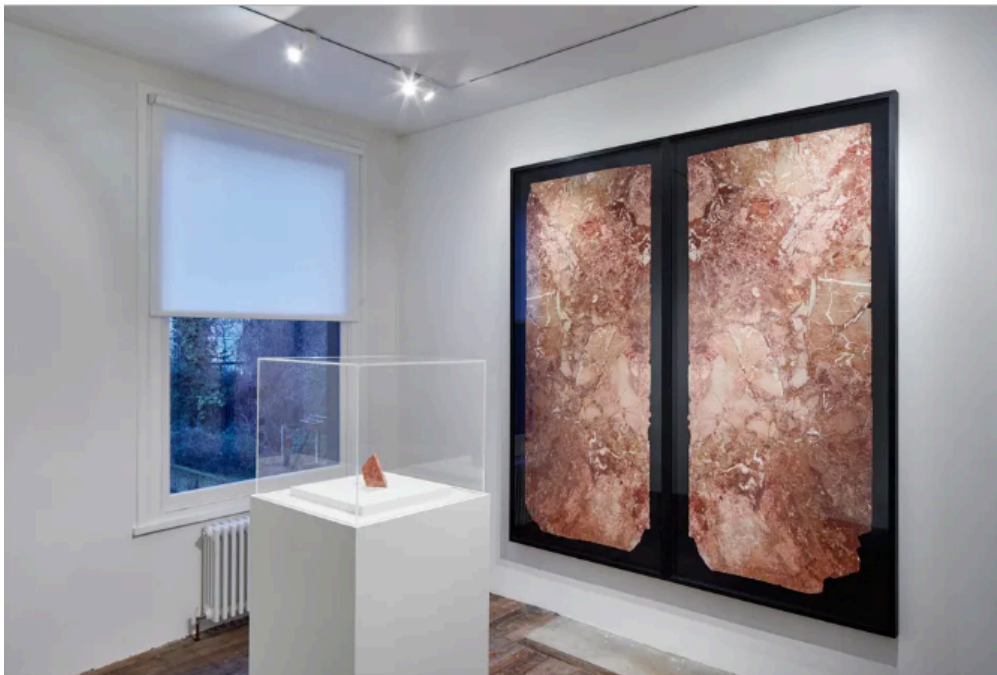
The impassive camerawork and editing reminds me of Alain Robbe-Grillet: it's a fetishised neutrality that compliments the things the camera sees. If we began in an underground quarry, we are now looking for prey. What is the real quarry here? Like the speculative apartments we can look down into from Tate Modern's new Switch House, the habitations in Siegel's *Quarry* are little more than stage sets. The flowers go unappreciated, the books unread, the toilets never flushed in anger, the furnishings swapped over as fashions change. *Quarry* ends on the unfinished windswept concrete of an apartment block still under construction, the floors open to the weather, the clamour of the city rising up from the streets below. The noise is a relief.



A Freudian army of little figurines in Siegel's *Fetish*, 2016. Photograph: Andy Stagg

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The space of *Quarry* is stately, Holst's Neptune lush as a comforting dream, under the protection of high-end goods, markers of an impeccable and impregnable taste, an unaffordable asceticism. The long views through the apartment look like corners of the upper floors of Renzo Piano's new Whitney Museum, a few blocks away and probably visible from some of the apartment windows. *Quarry* delivers a lifestyle that looks like art, or at least like an art gallery. Upstairs at SLG, Siegel is showing *Fetish*, shot at London's Freud Museum. Every year, all the stuff in Sigmund Freud's last consulting room gets a clean. His army of little figurines – which Louise Bourgeois, in a marvellously twisted essay, once called Freud's Toys – get lovingly brushed down and dusted. The camera lingers as a stiff paintbrush scuffs over the limbs of these little bronze men and gods, over the stone pharaohs, the goddess Shiva and an incongruous spiny porcupine.



*Dynasty*, 2017 includes a fragment of the Italian marble selected by Ivana Trump for the Trump Tower atrium. Photograph: Andy Stagg/Courtesy the artist and Simon Preston Gallery, New York

The famous couch gets an airing and a vacuum clean, the underblanket and rug shaken, the pillows plumped. No dried tear stains or slobbered gnawings at the rug on the couch remain. This is a pity. This north London room has seen some life. Those New York apartments have seen none, and give nothing away except an idea of taste. Finally, in the last room of Siegel's show, we come to the heart of darkness itself. Encased under Perspex on a plinth sits a chipped shard, the size of a small wedge of cake, a fragment of the Italian marble selected by Ivana Trump for the Trump Tower atrium, and purchased by the artist on eBay from a private collector in Connecticut last December. Nearby hang a pair of photographic scans of the marble slabs that decorate the tower's lobby. Their patterns mirror one another. It is just polished rock, but now it looks like evidence.

As cryptic and analytical as it is formally precise, Siegel's is an art of critical and social observation. Describing a world of possessions and trappings, mindsets and material culture, she shows how things seduce us, beguile us and betray us at every turn. How rich the world is, how squalid we are.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/jan/23/amie-siegel-video-art-south-london-gallery>