

Swedish artist Karin Lithell combines canvas with text to express the multivalent concept of “home.” Through comforting yet wistful paintings, Lithell encourages the viewer to wonder what makes one’s particular haven a home.

Home Sweet Home — On the Move will be on view at The Art League gallery from November 9— December 3, 2017. Throughout her exhibit, Lithell layers text over acrylic and oil paintings to pose the ineffable questions: what makes a home a home? How do you make a home for yourself when you’ve been forced to move? What of the animal population being pushed away from their homes due to habitat loss? Lithell articulates these topics by incorporating printing into her paintings, allowing her work to be read by viewers in a more literal sense — a text message of sorts.

Lithell carefully selected her text phrasing, pulling from sources literary and personal, keeping them in harmony with her paintings of sun-washed landscapes and luminous birch forests. “I want people to interpret my paintings as they wish,” Lithell remarked, “There is a Swedish expression for this: ‘Jag vill inte skriva någon på näsan’— I don’t want to write on anyone else’s nose— to tell them what to think. But I do want to spark something more.”

As a Swedish expatriate, Lithell is intimately familiar with the process of leaving home and making a new home—or homes, in her case, having lived in Åmål, Stockholm, St. Petersburg, Estonia, Copenhagen, and, currently, Washington, D.C. Lithell has certainly been on the move. It’s a privilege, in her eyes, to be able to relocate with support from friends, family, and employers. While living in Sweden, her lifetime of happy re-nesting experiences was thrown into sharp contrast when she befriended Ali, a young Afghani boy who endured the turmoil of migrating alone to Sweden, at the age of twelve. Viewers can find a quote from Ali on Lithell’s painting of a boy on a bike. Splashed across the top of the painting, the text reads: I feel like I left my heart in the country I was born. “Ali’s words were so beautiful, I had to do something more with them,” Lithell reflected.

As Lithell became more and more troubled by the massive human migrations occurring across the globe, she put palette knife to canvas and created her exhibit. For Lithell, painting with a palette knife creates an intriguing, scalloped surface. “I want to reward viewers for taking a closer look,” Lithell remarked, hoping that her painting’s 3-dimensional textures will entice eyes to linger. The scenes Lithell depicts are calming, yet longing in nature. Lean, speckled birch trees appear throughout her series, an homage to the birch forests of Sweden that feel like home to Lithell. “Home is a physical place and a psychological idea. It’s inside your heart,” the artist remarks. Lithell hopes that by considering what home means to them, viewers will join a larger conversation about human migration, refugees, and immigration— a conversation about finding home, on the move.