

The New York Times

Painting: An (Incomplete) Survey of the State of the Art

The latest in a series initiated in 1998 by two Chelsea art dealers, “Painting: Now and Forever, Part III” examines the medium’s turn toward figuration.

Since 1998, two galleries in Chelsea have treated the New York art world to a rare experience: a large, ongoing survey of contemporary painting, staged every 10 years. A piecemeal array of established, emerging and overlooked artists, it may include a few works from the last 50 years that the organizers find germane, as well as recent works by painters of all ages.

The latest iteration, “Painting: Now and Forever, Part III,” is on view in the three New York exhibition spaces of the Matthew Marks Gallery and the two of the Greene Naftali Gallery. The good news is that it reflects the resurgence of images and narrative in painting that has been gaining speed since the mid-1990s, creating a renewed equity with abstraction.

We see this represented in a work by Nicole Eisenman, who helped lead this change. Her “Luck Lines” (2018), one of the show’s best paintings, features a large red bulbous hand whose swirling lines have the texture of a refined woodblock, and give each finger its own personality.

The bad news is that too few of the younger painters who helped foment this turn in New York are present. Just as the show downplays abstraction, it also downplays New York, an important center of painting. It seems to have been conceived as a teaching moment, intent on raising consciousness about older artists and artists outside the city. But, if you consider what’s here and what’s not, you can extract a sense of how polymorphous the medium is now, even if it’s not the same as seeing it played out on the walls.

This first iteration of this show originated with the dealers Matthew Marks and Pat Hearn, who had, along with Paul Morris and Tom Healy, pioneered the Chelsea gallery scene in 1994. Mr. Marks was a stalwart of connoisseurship, mixing blue-chip and younger artists. Ms. Hearn was a gamin performance artist turned art dealer with an audacious eye; she started out in the East Village in the early 1980s, before landing in Chelsea.

After Ms. Hearn died of cancer at 45 in 2000, Mr. Marks carried on the project with Carol Greene of Greene Naftali. (Ms. Hearn’s gallery and the one run by her husband, Colin de Land, who died in 2003, are the subject of “The Conditions of Being Art: Pat Hearn Gallery and American Fine Arts, Co. (1983-2004),” at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College, through Dec. 14.)

The sprawl of around 100 paintings by 46 artists from a dozen countries in “Painting: Now and Forever, III” resembles a tasting menu comprising glimpses of unfamiliar artists or works, intriguing juxtapositions and evocations of absent painters. There are energizing juxtapositions such as, at Marks on West 22nd Street, a painting by Jasper Johns, the show’s eminence grise, with two abstractions by Howardena Pindell, in which the shared subjects include fields of white and dots.

Sometimes an artist’s work seems to deepen before your eyes. In the Matthew Marks space on West 24th Street, a 2008 self-portrait by the Photo Realist Robert Bechtle presents him as a kind of norm-core mystic, standing at the center of his darkened studio, like Munch, in a subtly hazy pointillist atmosphere.

A few artists unveil new styles, most notably the 84-year-old American painter Sam Gilliam. He has taken his interest in poured color far from his signature stain paintings, to a relatively geometric format that has its own radiant lushness and recalls his efforts from the early 1960s. In the big Marks space at 522 West 22nd Street, one of his works matches the saturated color of two paintings of sinister toylike figures by Karl Wirsum, 79, on the opposite wall.

Nearby a bright collagelike abstraction by Matt Connors (born 1973), exchanges color notes with “Imperial Nude (Paul Rosano),” a 1970 canvas by Sylvia Sleigh (1916-2010). This depicts a young man reclining odalisque-like on a substantial sofa draped in a bright orange textile; it highlights Ms. Sleigh’s delicate realism as a precedent for

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Roberta Smith, The New York Times, August 2, 2018

younger painters, including Aliza Nisenbaum and Njideka Akunyili Crosby (neither is here, but both could be). On an adjacent wall, two night scenes in a residential neighborhood by Noah Davis, a Los Angeles artist who died tragically young in 2015, merge reality and fantasy to meditate on black life.

Among the lesser-known artists is Bhupen Khakhar (1934-2003), a painter from India whose style derived from Indian miniatures and whose subject appears to be different kinds and degrees of human intimacy. His “In a Boat,” from 1984, is a nocturnal scene of several scantily clad or naked men (along with Picasso, clothed) on the deck of a craft near a mountainous peninsula that is especially beautiful.

The redoubtable but neglected Lois Dodd (born 1927) contributes two paintings of windows and 10 small delectable oil studies from nature, all reflecting her understated yet spontaneous painterly realism. Also on display are the symbolist paintings of Luchita Hurtado, 97, the Venezuelan-born artist who has lived in California since the 1940s. (She is the widow of the painter Lee Mullican; the artist Matt Mullican is their son.) Her clean-edged images sometimes evoke Georgia O’Keeffe; an untitled work of a naked female body (1970) seen from the point of view of its owner evokes some of Giacometti’s similarly pared-down female figures from his sculpture of the 1930s.

Works by older and younger artists sometimes converse, as with the exchange among Ms. Dodd and Ms. Hurtado’s paintings and the multifarious canvases of Leidy Churchman (born 1979). These all hang in the smaller Marks space at 526 West 22nd Street. Also here are two works by Xinyi Cheng, a Chinese-born, Netherlands-based artist who is the youngest in the show. (She turns 30 next year.) Ms. Cheng contributes the exceptional “Harnessing the Wind,” which shows a cropped, largely pink close-up of a naked man who seems to be tumbling through space, very much at the mercy of the wind.

The installation at Greene Naftali is more of a free-for-all: every painting for itself. But it’s not entirely disorderly. In the ground-floor space, Ms. Eisenman’s big red hand painting is balanced by two outside heads. One of them, “Shape of Painting, Summer Hit 2017” (2018) from the German artist Jana Euler (born 1982), is a portrait of the British singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran, whose “Shape of You” was a 2017 summer hit.

The other is “Self-Portrait (Neon)” by the American Alex Israel, also born in 1982. These days it seems de rigueur to find Mr. Israel’s work deplorable — at least on Twitter — and some of it is. But his 8-foot-tall trompe l’oeil neon profile is an eye-catching exception — as is its neighbor, a large, packed composition, “Animal Hours,” by the British installation artist Helen Marten.

The American Rodney McMillian’s “TBD” (2017), a process art painting composed of a lavender bedsheet and thick pours of latex, gives the show an ugly-beautiful moment. And there is one instance of coherent curatorial logic: A small gallery with one seemingly abstract painting per wall, two big ones by Ed Clark and Gedi Sibony, and two small ones by Whitney Claflin and Eiichi Shibata, a Japanese outsider artist. The show unravels rather distressingly in Greene Naftali’s eighth-floor space, where a glaring problem comes into focus.

For me, the resurrection of images in “Painting” is both a development out of and a rebuke to Conceptual Art. It indicates a renewed faith in the ability of painting to communicate holistically by fusing form, style, process and narrative. The problem is that too many of the younger painters in this exhibition don’t seem very interested in inventing their own process or form, which results in images that, while they may be briefly refreshing, are too often painted in familiar, unexciting ways.

Ms. Eisenman is among the painters who manage to bring it all together. Many other exemplars are not included here, among them Kerry James Marshall, Dana Schutz, Chris Ofili, Carroll Dunham and their great precursor, Alice Neel.

The lackluster paintings here suggest that Ms. Greene and Mr. Marks may not visit Lower East Side galleries enough. Tschabalala Self, Louis Fratino and Alex Bradley Cohen, who first emerged there, are among the younger artists who might have spiced things up. Also Nina Chanel Abney, who actually shows in Chelsea.

But who knows. Despite being museum scale, this show is organized with a minimum of what could be called institutional oversight. Just the two galleries’ owners and staff. As the show veers from insightful to arbitrary to oblivious, its sheer freedom is part of what makes it interesting. It just needs more company. It’s hard to be the only regularly repeating painting survey in New York.