

Derosia

Domenick Ammirati, Artforum, May 2021

ARTFORUM



OPENINGS

WHITNEY CLAFLIN

DOMENICK AMMIRATI

Opposite page: View of "Whitney Clafin: ADD SHOT," 2020–21. Bodega, New York. Wall: LOVE (!!!), 2020. Floor: Mime in a Merry-Go-Round, 2020.

Below: Whitney Clafin, C.F., 2013, oil on linen, 36 x 24".



WHITNEY CLAFLIN'S EARLY PAINTINGS were all ground, patterned found fabrics and weltering marks encrusted with street garbage and drugstore staples—a compact disc, a necklace, a club-entry wristband, eye shadow, psoriasis cream. Her 2014 exhibition “Crows” at Real Fine Arts in Brooklyn appeared to showcase a departure: Clafin filled the gallery with a suite of wide-open works featuring diaphanous clouds, drips, spatters, and clusters of spiky strokes arrayed on white backgrounds. From paintings that were all ground, she had moved to paintings that were all gesture, and in so doing she created a miniature drama around the painter’s supposed fingerprint. The stark contrast with what had come before actually represented less a shift in a practice than pseudo-parable about shifting within one’s practice, a self-conscious and slightly tongue-in-cheek tale of self-discovery.

The other half of the show consisted of a pseudo-museological vitrine containing two sketches, one of a burning candle and one of a young woman masturbating, and myriad pages composed on an honest-to-God typewriter. The verse they contained, as I recall, was a flustering mixture of teen angst, fragmentary incident, and language poetry. The manuscript has gone missing, but sampling other verse of the period gives its flavor, advertent typos and all:

Other girls in drug bondage
 enflamed by the prospect
 very fresh, unwittingly fold to me
 while I watch yourhair tail down the side

 My narrative of being, to avoid

 The default display of amusement

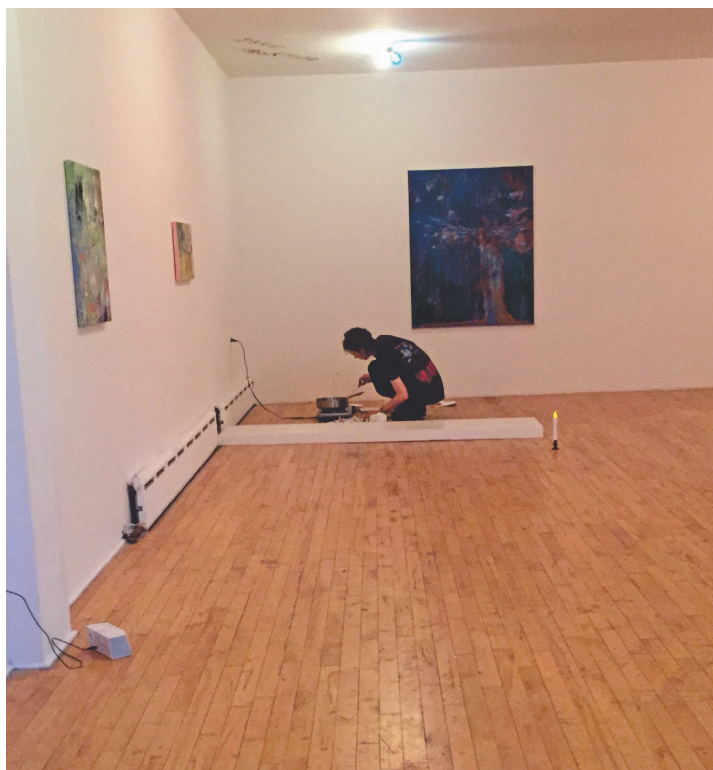
As with the paintings and their drama of the mark, so with the vitrine: two different dramas of identity, that of the artist finding a voice and that of the adolescent’s internal theater of self-definition. With these disparate halves, “Crows” conveyed a disorienting sensation of two plays being performed simultaneously (and impossibly) by the same actors in different costumes.

Clafin’s exhibitions are rarely explicit in their agendas, but at this crucial juncture, she produced a clear statement of a core feature of her multifarious art: its sublimation of identity from a solid state into a cloud. Clafin works in language, altered readymades, sound, scent, performance, and other mediums. There’s even a parlor game called *IMPULSE*. For our purposes, it’s safe to call her a painter, since paintings are typically the focal point of her shows. These days, her exhibitions tend to roughly balance canvases in various modes with miscellaneous but hardly random items,



Above: Whitney Clafin, *Forget Marriage*, 2017, soot on ceiling, 4 x 62".

Right: Whitney Clafin, *Raised in a Jail*, 2017. Performance view, Real Fine Arts, New York, March 6, 2017. Whitney Clafin. Photo: Annie Ochmanek.



e.g., a miniature disco ball and wine bottles used as candleholders, dorm-room style. In conversation, she has self-deprecatingly drawn a parallel between her approach to exhibition making and event planning; *mise-en-scène* is anything but an afterthought, sometimes skeletal but always based.

Clafin's 2017 exhibition "Just Disco," also at Real Fine Arts, featured an elaborate scenography that captured her sensibility with particular vividness. Every Sunday, Clafin conducted a performance in which she made grilled cheese sandwiches on a hot plate, accompanied by the creaky dance-noise beat of a ten-minute song she had composed and recorded titled "Raised in a Jail." On a small shelf resided plastic shot glasses and an open bottle of Cointreau left over from a recent session of making margaritas, while on a nearby plinth rested a pair of headphones, whence emanated an altered-and-looped snippet of Built to Spill's "Temporarily Blind." The lighting conditions mimicked those in the artist's studio at the time: She blacked out the windows and lit the space with blue and red bulbs. A stuffed dog greeted you at the door, and there were two lighter-burn text pieces on the ceiling, one saying FORGET MARRIAGE and the other SAVE ABORTION. Also overhead, letting a bit of faux sky into the dim space, was a painted oculus showing a few fluffy clouds.

The ambience felt hermetic, heightened, a tad psychedelic—an impression amplified by the paintings on view, an ambitious ensemble that looked strangely like early-twentieth-century modernism. One predominantly light-blue canvas featured a grid faintly warping in the background and robust yellow slivers amid patchwork and overpatterning in robin's egg and cerulean, all a bit like Mondrian on the verge of a crucial breakthrough. Another canvas, bloody red, gathered glyph-like forms struggling to distinguish themselves, reminiscent of Matta but with curves instead of hard lines, and with the letters TV aggressing in one corner. These accomplished, process-based abstractions seemed a world away from a lukewarm liqueur and a scorched ceiling, but in Clafin's hands, a failure to cohere becomes not only puzzling but also entrancing. A liminal but invigorating sense of otherworldliness pervades her shows, as if within them reality's choke collar slackens ever so slightly.

One way to read Clafin's convivially disruptive impulses, and especially her refusal to let an image of herself as authorial figure resolve into crisp HD, is to situate them in relation to the Cologne School.

One way to read Clafin's convivially disruptive impulses, and especially her refusal to let an image of herself as authorial figure resolve into crisp HD, is to situate them in relation to the Cologne School, whose preoccupation with artistic identity as ironized performance was so influential. Clafin certainly possesses the insouciant catholicism of the cohort that includes Martin Kippenberger and Michael Krebber, the latter of whom loomed especially large among painters when Clafin was coming of age as an artist. She also shares their critical (in both senses) attention to what happens beyond the borders of the canvas, a concern extended by Jutta Koether into what David Joselit famously dubbed "network painting." Looming in the mists of the Rhine is Sigmar Polke, a protean character who liked a nice piece of found fabric himself. But, crucially, Clafin dumps the Krebberite dandyism in favor of the DIY and purges self-thwarting of its paradoxically grandiose quality—no more jockeying for canonical position, no more agon with the historical avant-garde. In Clafin's very contemporary perspective,



Above: Whitney Clafin, *Sigh Co.*, 2020, magazine clipping on knife, $\frac{3}{4} \times 8 \times \frac{1}{2}$ ".

Below: Whitney Clafin, *Life ('s like this)*, 2020, Nat Sherman cigarettes, ash, alcohol ink, enamel on found fabric, 20 x 30".

Bottom: Whitney Clafin, *Spaces*, 2020, oil and ink on linen, 12 x 16".



there's nothing so special about tearing down the self and building it back up; in a dividualized world, it happens every day, all the time.

In 2017, in *Topical Cream* magazine, Clafin ascribed both her humor and her use of quotation or homage to a kind of compulsive mimicry:

I can't resist impersonation when I'm working. I'm always talking to myself and making jokes in my head, so when I am painting, I try to only partially articulate that stuff. This way I can affect the look of the work quickly and staunchly. I need to have these kinds of divisions and dead-ends in order to protect myself. So, sometimes the paintings will super intensely or low key conjure other paintings, but only for a moment, like just as an escalator in a parking garage.

Clafin's fleeting imitative tics contribute to the way her work erodes identity, keeping her position slightly adrift both within an individual canvas and across them. Her elusiveness untethers the work from the bedrock of milieu, making it impossible to pin her art to a social or intellectual scene that crystallizes and propagates artistic mannerisms. Her practice can't be fully plotted along the Cologne-to-New York axis or any other. Rather, it relies on, for lack of a better term, *vibe*. It's a *vibe* you may catch or may not, but the work tries to make you feel welcome, eschewing hieratic modes of appreciation.

In 2020, Clafin put together a show at New York's Bodega gallery that flaunted her fondness for thoroughly unchic cultures of crafting, Americana, and indie-rock and lo-fi aesthetics, as well as the vague but undeniable presence of the spiritual in her work—or, if not the spiritual, then the ineffable, the thing that's always out of your reach and will forever remain so. There was a \$5 photocopy multiple of a Clafin drawing depicting a frame from Hitchcock's identity-swap thriller *Strangers on a Train* and a ready-made in the form of a pink-handled steak knife dubbed *Sigh Co.*, 2020, to which that artist had affixed the words *A CATCHPHRASE*. The paintings, including several made via a technique of overpainting and sanding down, showed a fresh variety. On the surface of *Life ('s like this)*, 2020, Nat Sherman cigarettes spelled out the word *STILL*, with the *i* dotted in ash. A few fabric pieces bore minimal intervention, like a sewn-on hippie-dippie sunflower patch saying *LOVE*. The more process-based works included *Spaces*, 2020, a little landscape in vaguely Impressionist mode and one of the more overtly lovely paintings Clafin has ever produced, despite a slight hedging in the form of a painted-in black-and-pink frame that matched the scene's sunset clouds. The ongoing plague scotched the chance of any performances, so Clafin created a kind of stand-in for herself, a mannequin in jaunty togs carrying a shopping bag: a perfectly cipherish self-portrait. Instead of offering the visitor headphones through which to avail themselves of the soundtrack, she placed the headphones on the dummy, a strange but not at all surprising gesture of generosity toward the inanimate. It looked like she, the mannequin, was having fun, unlike the rest of us.

It's worth noting that thwarting an authorial identity, even if it's a doomed enterprise, is an attempt to thwart branding as well. It's worth noting, too, that Clafin's work is capillaried with references to, if not quite poverty, then precarity. Grilled cheese on a hot plate, patching your clothes, inventing your own amusements. Even Clafin's process of overpainting began out of necessity as a way to recycle canvases. The painted-in frame in *Spaces* conjures the bygone decor preferences of a mostly disappeared social class. It also reminds us that the work is there to be sold and taken home as a matter of the artist's survival. But what a lovely thing and a lovely connection you get in return, if you can afford it. The memory of visiting with it is fortunately available to all of us. □

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Laura McLean Ferris, Topical Cream, January 6, 2021

TOPICAL CREAM

ADD SHOT: Whitney Claflin at Bodega



There's a sparseness to Whitney Claflin's exhibitions, creating an impression that things are thinned out, in short supply. In ADD SHOT, an imperative exhibition title to which one might reply "OK, fuck it," a white room hung with paintings is presided over by an old-fashioned mannequin on a display stand, wearing clothes and headphones that the artist might wear. The last days of Barney's come to mind: the sight of luxury items stripped of their usual display devices and appearing just as they are. Yet this atmosphere of lack is not simply one of absence. ADD SHOT is characteristic of Claflin's recent exhibitions, in which a stylistic variety of paintings are added by sculptures, audio components, and other elements, creating a tenuous yet insistent web of relations, subtly conveying that things are only just managing to hold it together.

In Claflin's painting VAMP U.S.A (all works 2020), bluish-white ground forms the base for a large central white spiral, covered with a delicate lace of scratchy strokes in red and blue. The red lines, in particular, resemble fresh razor cuts, appearing to bleed with droplets and clots that spill down the canvas. The red-white-and-blue palette evokes the Star-Spangled Banner and other American symbols, yet if this painting has a formal relationship to the flag, it is one that has been distorted into a bleached out death spiral. Made in a year when America's global reputation for death ascended to the top of several charts, it's perhaps an appropriate enough emblem for the state and its failures. However, there is also a performative goth attitude to those gory drips, like the conspicuous blood drooling down from the corner of a red mouth on Halloween: the VAMP of the title might refer to vamping as much as it does to vampires. On the one hand, 2020's most prominent horrors are institutional, not readily depictable within the aesthetics of horror or painting or flags; on the other hand, many of the figures in power who are responsible are literal ghouls, almost kitsch in their cravenness. Is sincerity vs. performativity even a valid distinction in such a context? Such looped thought processes create a double bind in Claflin's painting, a snare effect that is echoed in several works in ADD SHOT.

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Laura McLean Ferris, Topical Cream, January 6, 2021

While a second canvas, three stars/ one rose (night sky/ a wall), shares the American-style palette of VAMP U.S.A., it diverges from the former in scale, form, and technique, creating the impression of a distant cousin rather than a sibling. Reworking an older painting, Claflin power-sanded sections away from the surface, creating the layered suggestions of age that one might find by peeling back layers of décor or stone-washing jeans, and new details; three little black stars on the right-hand side of the canvas, redolent of ballpoint pen doodles on a school textbook, are vulnerable and expressive and continue the theme of overlay and appliqué. While the patina of this work is more romantic than its relative, summoning flowers and starlit skies, this symbolism is just as fraught, bringing to mind the layers of emptied out American cliché that one would find in Lana Del Rey lyrics.



On my visit to the gallery, Claflin told me that Charlotte Perkins Gilman's gothic short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), a feminist literary touchstone, had been in her thoughts during the year. Confined to a room with the eponymous décor by a doctor husband who insists that a "rest cure" will benefit her health, the protagonist of Gilman's story begins to see figures lurking in the walls, behind the pattern of the paper. As her diaristic account unfolds, the reader is left with a haunting, ambiguous story of either ghostly possession or manic psychosis: the woman in question merges with the figure trapped behind the hostile pattern, claiming that she crawls out at night. Imprisoned in a room with bars on the windows, however, the protagonist is damned any which way the story is read.

As well as carrying messages about forced domestic "cures" as a form of patriarchal control, the story also might resonate in a year in which many individuals were consigned to their homes and found themselves in psychological tumult, staring at the walls. The most apparent connection to Gilman's story is perhaps made in *LOVE (!!!)*, a work of stretched found yellow fabric with a bold graphic pattern of woozy flowers, with a flower-power style patch in the shape of a daisy attached with the word "LOVE" emblazoned at its center (the same design is painted on the back of the mannequin's pale-yellow polo shirt). A second found-fabric work, *All signal, no noise (!!!)*, was made from an olive-colored skirt with a sinuous, almost grammatical pattern in black glitter. Like a helpful guide to the pattern's laws, Claflin has picked out each distinct element of the design with a different brightly colored dot in fabric paint. Both works are concerned with pattern as structure, carrying both apparent and hidden messages, yet when a figure does emerge from a kind of yellow wall it's in the shape of *I prefer walking* (Veeza), a large expressionistic painting dominated by Joan Mitchell-esque streaks of buttercup yellow. The soothing shape of a cat licking its paw emerges from the scene. As a form of wish fulfillment, *I prefer walking* is a gentle image of domestic peace, finding a more ominous partner in *Spaces*, a small pink canvas of a thrillingly bright landscape in shades of peacock and iridescent pink, a feverish vision of a fantasy outdoor space, suggesting the mind of a person who is held inside. The natural world seems to burn with red flames, and the picture is heavily enclosed by a thick black border, summoning the painted frames of the British painter Howard Hodgkin.

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Laura McLean Ferris, Topical Cream, January 6, 2021



Whitney Clafin, "I prefer walking (Veeza)," 2020. Oil, ink, enamel, eye shadow, glitter, sequins on linen. 48 x 36 in. Among all these works, outside these domestic imaginaries, Clafin's mannequin appears to move along the flimsy tightrope between them, listening to songs of the city on the exhibition's Soundcloud mixtape, and carrying a cheap plastic bag covered in dark pigment. This painting seems to have been created to move through the streets. "I feel much less alone," said Clafin in March this year, in an interview with Domenick Ammirati in Artforum, "knowing almost everyone has landed on the same thin ice I've been skating on for years." [1] The bag-as-painting keeps moving through the city, moving through the gallery, singing its own story of tenuousness. It's survival in the city when you live from to day to day. City streets don't have much pity. When you're down that's where you'll stay, in the city (ah-ah). [2]

Laura McLean-Ferris is Chief Curator at Swiss Institute, New York, and a writer who regularly contributes to Artforum, ArtReview, Art-Agenda, Even, frieze, Mousse, and Flash Art International. She was the recipient of the 2015 Creative Capital | Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant, and her short-form collection *The Lacustrine* was published in 2016.

[1] "Helter Shelter," Domenick Ammirati in conversation with Whitney Clafin on Artforum.com, March 27, 2020. <https://www.artforum.com/slant/domenick-ammirati-talks-to-artist-whitney-clafin-about-surviving-an-economic-shock-82590>.

[2] The Eagles, "In The City" (1979), included in the audio component of Whitney Clafin's *Mime in a Merry Go Round* (2020), accessed at <https://soundcloud.com/bodegaa/add-shot>.

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Sean Tatol, Manhattan Art Review, November 2020

Whitney Claflin - ADD SHOT - Bodega - ****

I don't quite know yet what to make of Whitney and Maggie Lee and, I assume, other artists' turn to playing with Y2K teen girl culture: sleepover crafts, shopping at Claire's, being "hyper," etc. On the one hand I'm staunchly against the fetishistic nostalgia so many artists indulge in these days, on the other what they're doing seems to be less of an aesthetic escapism and more of a mode of working. They're using the mindset as a way of approaching art like a preteen, which is less restrictive than that of an art world adult, so even if I'm not sold on it I won't reject it out of hand either. As the overly literal press release notes, the show is something of a cultural mixtape. It takes her no longer fashionable past identity of being a punk and going to the mall and reappropriates it into something that is currently fashionable, namely the acknowledgement that she once was a punk and went to the mall. I have reservations about that sleight of hand (why can't people just be what they are now?), but the paintings are good and the patterned fabric on canvas non-paintings don't read as cop-outs like most "gluing something to a canvas" pieces do. The breadth of means gives the work as a whole a refreshing incoherence, unlike most nostalgic art that can be easily reduced to a simple set of stylistic signifiers. It's fun, a word that's rarely complimentary in art, but it works here.

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SLANT

HELTER SHELTER

Domenick Ammirati talks to artist Whitney Claflin about surviving an economic shock



A view of “the hovel.” Photo: Whitney Claflin.

My first impulse when this all began was to buy groceries. My second was to see how people were doing. The art world, for all its flaws and fissures, is a community, and it’s the one I’ve got. When its trappings recede in a time like this—as if there were any time like this, exactly—you’re left with the people. I’ll be talking to some of them over the next couple of weeks, seeing how they’re doing materially, emotionally, physically, financially, and so on.

—Domenick Ammirati

FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS, I’ve been living illegally in the leaky garage of a former funeral parlor, which had been converted to an office at a time when wood paneling was a generic interior option—“the hovel,” as I affectionately call it. Surviving hand to mouth, check to check, without savings, and my credit mauled by student loans, I have no chance of getting my name on a lease of any kind anywhere in New York City. But when I found the place on Craigslist, a collector came through with phenomenal help—the hovel is, after all, a stunningly affordable, one-of-a-kind, nothing-like-this-exists-in-NYC-anymore workspace—and he helped me get the paperwork signed. Eventually, for various reasons, I moved in completely. There’s a shower and two sinks; carving out a way to hide a twin bed and a hotplate was a no-brainer. I have to keep my clothing in a filing cabinet, but I no longer had to worry about making two rents.

Of course, the landlord refused to ever draft a lease longer than one year, and since the space is zoned commercial, each year he’s gouged me, increasing the rent by \$100 a month. I’ve never been able to keep up, but I’ve always kept at it. As the rent climbed, I had no choice but to pay in installments, with 50 to 80 percent of each week’s meager income being left in an envelope for the landlord. One week a month, my phone and internet are due simultaneously, which leaves me with between zero and twenty dollars to get by on for seven days, after purchasing a weekly MetroCard to commute to work.

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Domenick Ammirati, Artforum, March 27, 2020

On February 28, I opened an envelope that I assumed would be a lease renewal with a further price gouge that I would have to find a way to magically deal with. Instead, I received my final bill. The landlord wanted me out by April 1. Nature poured me a strong neurochemical cocktail of panic and dread, garnished with a sliver of relief. I put the envelope down and went to a friend's opening in Chelsea. Coronavirus was still a conversational topic you could elect to skip at this time. Mainly we wondered together if it was really okay for us to communally graze from the after-event's plate-it-yourself charcuterie tower.

I work doing floating freelance bookkeeping at a nightclub. When I started, I was paid fifteen dollars an hour, now up to twenty-two, and capped at a max of twenty-one hours a week. The amount of money I'm earning, including any freelance work I land on top of that, is woefully below what I need to make ends meet. I can never find enough high-paying gigs to slot into my leftover patches of time. Making art is super time-consuming, and even though I make a lot of work out of found objects, it still carries a fair amount of overhead. I love my job, but it's really hard to have my hours pruned even lower on a week when the bar doesn't bring in enough cash. In turn, I'm grateful for the flexibility they offer when I need to travel for a show or spend more concentrated time in the studio. I can anticipate the loss of income, self-isolate to reduce costs, and focus on painting. I eat two meals a day—oatmeal and lentils from the rice cooker—follow a free yoga channel on YouTube to out-zen the precarity, and ration the weed. In some ways, not a lot has changed for me now that we're under quarantine.

March arrived and COVID-19 cranked up the volume. I talked to the club's owners about my unstable living situation; starting April 1, I wanted to work more hours in any capacity. One week later, like every other bar and restaurant in New York, they were shut down. I broke my shelter in place on St. Patrick's Day to go in and help the owners place accounts on hold, clean, put away any food that could be saved in the walk-in fridge, and other sad, necessary tasks. I was able to rescue a lot of fresh mint that lost its job of becoming a mojito; its fragrance wafting out of my tote was an emotional anesthetic as we trekked to my hovel together, both wilted, uprooted, and out of work indefinitely.

With the halt in evictions, my crisis over what to do about the hovel was put on pause. Then I heard from a friend who has a bedroom available for April. I followed up and decided to take it. I don't know how I'm going to pay for it after May, but I feel much less alone knowing almost everyone has landed on the same thin ice I've been skating on for years.

Whitney Clafin is an artist living in New York.

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Trevor Yeung, *Night Mushroom Colon (Six)*, 2018,
night-lights, plug adaptors, 6 x 6 x 8»

“Holly Village”

BODEGA

167 Rivington Street Lower Level East
September 13–October 20, 2019

This group exhibition, its title a portmanteau of *Hollywood* and *East Village*—both places suffocated by fanciful and rabid delusions alike—features a mélange of materials: a lamp, nail decals, night-lights, dish towels, jewels, and a smart speaker from Amazon.com, among other kinds of stuff. Of course, to call these items “stuff” is not an insult, but an acknowledgment that (any) things can be amplified to speak volumes. The late Lutz Bacher, for one, dipped

her hands into the intersecting streams of past and present to deliver homely emissaries of the real—a realm that we know is just an amalgamation of stories. One such artifact of her process included here is *Angry Bird*, 2016, an effigy of the titular video-game character as a polyester sack, covering a helium balloon and sentenced, pathetically, to a corner.

Trevor Yeung’s *Night Mushroom Colon (Six)*, 2018, has multiple plastic ’shroom caps sprouting from plugged in adaptors. It might be best experienced in the dark, but at daytime it still manages to leave appreciable room for the imagination. Across the gallery is Whitney Clafin’s *Fax Mish*, 2019, its title a scrambled tribute to the nearby Lower East Side watering hole Max Fish. A faux expressionism covers the painting’s stretched support of wool suiting fabric. It is also embellished with carbon-transferred flower drawings filled in with groovy colors; one blossom has the word *TIMER* scratched into its painted petals. In both shape and color, the beads that dangle from pierced holes in the work’s surface resemble macaroni, punctuating it with a confident sort of errancy. Its handmade quality feels close to home but, as a picture, a tad alienating; like Yeung’s sculpture, it seems to imply that the carefully crafted abode, like any idealized place, can be something suffocating, ill-fitting. Hung on another wall, Jake Levy’s pair of ominously proportioned nurse costumes, with their aggressively oversize shoulders and micro-width waists, might compel the outfits’ intended wearers to flap and wheeze in agreement.

— Paige K. Bradley

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.

Derosia

The New Yorker, December 19, 2016

THE NEW YORKER

Zombie Formalism

This small, scrappy group show plants a seed that may grow, dignifying the current snark for jejune abstract painting. A statement—“art with a diversely uniform look, manifest in rule-bound yet random outcomes”—dates the tendency to the early nineteen-seventies, when it flourished briefly under the label of lyrical abstraction. Earnestly pleasant works from back then by the likes of Jeff Way and Carol Haerer commune with new ones by such young guns as Whitney Claffin and Julia Rommel. Spin paintings from 1986 by Walter Robinson, the snarker-in-chief who coined the titular epithet, preside.

— *The New Yorker*

ARTFORUM



View of “Whitney Clafin: Have You Ever Met a Mime So Real?,” 2016.

LOS ANGELES

Whitney Clafin

RICHARD TELLES FINE ART

7380 Beverly Blvd

October 22–December 22, 2016

Whitney Clafin’s storefront feels more like an eye exam than a department-store display. Where artists such as Andy Warhol interwove art and commerce by putting their paintings in shop windows, Clafin renders the small, collaged objects she places behind glass almost inscrutable. Instead of jettisoning spectacle, though, she suggests it with bright lights that turn the window into a luminous frame, lit 24/7 and visible to passersby. That bright glow stands in tension with the artworks within, where three silver trays hang in a row, each adorned with cut-up typewritten text evoking zine aesthetics, for the series “Have You Ever Met a Mime So Real?,” 2016. Beneath each tray—faux silver and aspiring to sophistication, yet closer to the high-school cafeteria than Tiffany’s—is a plastic comb, one pointing in a different direction from the other two. As in modernist poetry, the scraps of words nearly cohere into meaning but not quite. A further obstacle: The trays and combs are far enough away from the window and the font of the text is small enough that the poems pasted upon them are impossible to read without squinting. The fruits of this painfully close looking are fragments such as “the hair on his arms voted onto the current culture phenomenon.”

Mundane objects are presented as votive relics, and the three aligned platters suggest a religious triptych. They serve not just as grounds for the textual content but also as mirrors that catch the viewer in the act of reading, or the headlights of passing cars. These cast-asides produce an experience of intimacy as one tries to decipher their mysterious messages; the middle tray reads, “everything is normal. / but it’s not.” Words tumble down the metallic surface in a column, continuing: “I wanted someone / someone, really.”

— *Nicholas Chittenden Morgan*

Derosia

Christopher Bollen, Interview Magazine, December 2, 2015

Interview



Whitney Clafin

By Christopher Bollen

Photography Christian MacDonald

AGE: 32.

ORIGINALLY FROM: Providence, RI.

CURRENTLY LIVE: Brooklyn.

GALLERY: Real Fine Arts, New York.

DESCRIPTION OF WORK: Painting, writing, performance. I make whatever I want whenever I want, but not everyone sees everything.

WHEN YOU FIRST CONSIDERED YOURSELF A FULL-TIME ARTIST: The idea of a “full-time artist,” as I have been hearing the term lately, is a totally false notion constructed by poseurs and capitalist

pigs. When you're making work, you're making work. You can't expect anyone to look at it or give a shit, ever. If you don't have the strength to work through this reality, or in spite of it, you're not making art, you're making objects or scenarios or moments that service capitalism.

THE MOST CHALLENGING OR SUCCESSFUL WORK YOU'VE MADE: There's a language-based piece that I recently re-performed that has been very difficult for me to reengage with. It's performative and requires participation, which is challenging to orchestrate in gallery settings. The piece works best when it's an intimate scenario, like an apartment, but then you're left with the problem of limited access, when the piece is meant to encourage cooperation, interaction, and lowering fences between people who otherwise might not be super-inclined to interact. The whole piece is actually much more accessible than my paintings are but is far more difficult to make visible.

THE MOST SURPRISING REACTION TO YOUR WORK YOU'VE RECEIVED: OMG, one time some lady told me that I should be worried that my makeup, jewelry, and clothing too closely resembled my art, and that because I'm a woman I should check that. I was like, "Bitch, please." I will literally take an earring out of my ear and sew it into a painting if I feel like that is what the work is asking for. I tend to shop for makeup for my art, and then I use it on my face if I feel like I'm cool with how it looks on me. My work has, like, two rooms—a room for just me and a room for me and everyone else that may see it.

THE BEST THING ABOUT BEING AN ARTIST IN NEW YORK: Participating in a collective fantasy.

THE WORST: Real estate.

DOES THE CURRENT ART WORLD FOSTER OR DEVOUR TALENT? There are many current art worlds; the one I'm choosing to interact with professionally right now as an artist and employee absolutely devours talent. It's savage, duh. So many people making gross things for worse reasons. It's exhausting and aggravates my depression. But there are other art worlds that exist in my mind, in a handful of my friendships, and, like, in moments between raindrops that are more loving and generative than anything else I've encountered so far in life.



OBSERVER

‘Whitney Clafin: Crows’ at Real Fine Arts



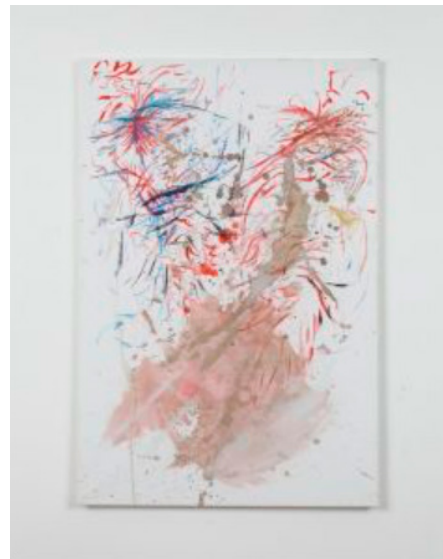
‘C.F.’ (2013) by Clafin. (Courtesy the artist and RFA)

If painting is a way of storing time, as the German painter Jutta Koether argued in a recent lecture—artists building up marks over various durations to form a single image—then Whitney Clafin’s paintings show that process going haywire, shedding linearity and taking on a life of its own. Almost uniformly pared down from those in her past shows, these works often have just a few lines and wisps of paint on solid white grounds and seem to be in the midst of melting down or swirling into new compositions.

Ms. Clafin gets a lot done in her relatively small (most are 3 by 2 feet), swoon-inducing paintings, and you have to look all over the art-historical map to tease out reference points: Andre Masson’s quickest, most ecstatic drawings, the fleshy violet hues of Maria Lassnig, the hazy, surreal atmospheres of Yves Tanguy, Helen Frankenthaler at her airiest, Martin Barré’s simple but guileful lines, Charline von Heyl’s antic energy and Michael Krebber if he was compelled to keep going after making the few marks that adorn many of his canvases.

But those are only the most fleeting hints and quotes. Ms. Clafin’s paintings captivate because they occupy a none-too-easily-won space that is both splashily spontaneous and immaculately reasoned. Luminous red lines glide right next to drips of the same color that look haphazard and violent, like spilled blood. Wine has soaked one canvas, and wax has been dripped on another—moves that give the tiniest thread of narratives (bacchanalian, incantatory, pathetic) and remind you that these are just things in the world, objects to be used, adored, displayed, rethought. They’ve been worked on so that they can work on you.

(Through Feb. 16, 2014)



‘Flied’ (2013) by Clafin. (Courtesy the artist and RFA)

Derosia

Bosko Blagojevic, Artforum, January 2014

ARTFORUM



Whitney Clafin, C. F., 2013, oil on linen, 36 x 24".

alongside gouache, melted candle wax, red wine, and cosmetic products to create complex, extroverted abstractions.

NEW YORK

Whitney Clafin

REAL FINE ARTS

184 STERLING PLACE 2ND FL

January 4–February 16, 2014

Whitney Clafin dresses her deadstock prestretched canvases with a flip attitude that borrows as much from 1980s painting out of Cologne as it does from the craft of the makeup artist. For “Crows,” her second solo exhibition at Real Fine Arts, Clafin returns brushstrokes to her abstractions for the first time in several years—her recent shows have presented works in which paint was applied by less conventional means, such as by squeegee, transfer via paper, or sticks. Here, she uses carefully mixed oil colors

Many of the paintings are nebulas of alluring, sparsely applied colors, which take an explicitly seductive approach to draw viewers into the works’ deeper logic. The glossy teen lipstick hues in *Untitled*, 2013, for example, bring us into a work that evokes a broken typography with its incomplete glyphs and curvilinear strokes. This lipstick-traces-on-the-wall narrative is quickly derailed by a larger form near the bottom right that suggests something more corporeal—an internal organ, perhaps. Other works such as *Fice Fice Fice Fice* and *C. F.*, both 2013, create similar tensions, evoking a hospital bed with their clean white base and messy, unpredictable spills of color. These pools of pigment contrast with floral palettes that seem lifted from nature while possessing a post-Photoshop intensification of affect.

The key to “Crows” might be a murdered-out matte-black display case (that Clafin also designed) with typewritten poems and drawings on paper on top of it, all of which constitutes a single piece. Here, typeset and hand-rendered text is depicted alongside drawings of more fleshed-out elements—things that we may sense, if not fully see, in the paintings that encircle the display case, which is positioned in the center of the gallery. In one drawing, a woman masturbates on her knees; in another, a candle burns. Words such as *fuck*, *scar*, *divine flow*, and *vibrato* quiver in faded ink printed by an antique typewriter. Emotionally laden half-sentences that could have been excerpted from late-night e-mails add a denser center to an exhibition that exists as a cloudy mass of moods and whispers.

— *Boško Blagojević*

The New York Times

Art Fairs, Full of Bling if Not Fire

THIS year the expansion of the art world beyond its traditional boundaries reached new extremes. On many fronts it seemed that the global was winning out over the local, what with the continued proliferation of art fairs, the spread of auctions and the franchising of art galleries, on the Gagosian model, around the globe. And this year it often seemed as if the effects of all this — a combined draining of energy and further stratification of the art world into haves and have-nots — were registering most powerfully in New York, which still has the biggest gallery scene in the world.

The machine driving this expansion — a sparkling sphere of money, shiny art and shiny people — hovers like a giant, top-heavy spaceship above what I consider the serious art world, where real art comes from. You see it when you pick up the equally shiny art magazines. But unless you're one of the players actually involved in buying or selling, it remains remote, a world unto itself. Sometimes it seems as if it could just take off — with all its bling, astounding prices and show-off collectors and climbers — and park in some other part of the art galaxy, there to thrive or collapse of its own accord.

But that's probably not going to happen. The fairs in particular have become an essential fact of the lives and livelihoods of art galleries of all kinds, not just the blue-chip ones catered to by the various Basel and Frieze iterations. Attending several art fairs a year, mainly in the United States and Europe, is now what many galleries do, even the fledgling ones on the Lower East Side. It is how they sell art, make contacts and establish their bona fides with dealers from other cities. But as dealers stretch themselves thinner and thinner, it is inevitable that local art scenes will pay a price.

I felt it this year in the New York galleries, which I love and where I spend an inordinate amount of time. Things seemed to have slowed and quieted down, even before Hurricane Sandy swamped Chelsea. Often there didn't seem to be as many people or as much excitement in the galleries. I often wondered if dealers or artists were hoarding the good stuff for the fairs.

I also thought of a Los Angeles Times article from the summer of 2011 about Margo Leavin, doyenne of the Los Angeles gallery scene, closing her gallery after 40 years. She was doing so, she said, because of the increasing importance of art fairs and what she saw as the decreasing interest in "the gallery show experience."

At the time it seemed like an embittered parting salvo from someone who had simply decided to retire, but it may characterize a general condition, the shifting of attention and energy. It did not seem coincidental to the sense of things slowing down that some galleries were scheduling longer and therefore fewer shows, mounting only two this fall instead of the usual three or even four.

I found myself walking around a lot this fall thinking that people need to do better. There were too many vacant-looking, phoned-in exhibitions by artists from all over the world, shows that looked like something art dealers were doing to kill time between fairs. And there were moments when galleries seemed to be trying to fight back with immense, festivalist art-fair extravaganzas. These shows included Thomas Hirschhorn at Gladstone, Leonardo Drew at Sikkema Jenkins and Jonah Freeman and Justin Lowe at Marlborough. Their environmental pieces seemed designed, like art fairs, to give you more than you can possibly look at: Let Us Overwhelm You was the guiding principle. (For the most part my socks stayed on.)

Derosia

Roberta Smith, The New York Times, December 13, 2012

There were also some environments that seemed to dissent from or parody such overkill, namely Klara Liden's sardonic show, which crammed the space at Reena Spaulings Fine Art with discarded Christmas trees in January, and, in the fall Sarah Oppenheimer's eye-cleansing torquing of the white cube at P.P.O.W. and Andra Ursuta's show of sculpture and smashed walls and windows (the gallery's) at Ramiken Crucible. And there were other, more routine exceptions throughout the season, mostly involving small galleries and young artists, when you got a sense of the art gallery as vital node of creativity: Jordan Wolfson's astounding video at Alex Zachary/Peter Currie and Hans Schabus's at Simon Preston; Anya Kielar's fey, tapestrylike renderings of women at Rachel Uffner; Whitney Claffin's small, weirdly encrusted paintings at Thomas Erben; and Kerstin Brätsch's see-through glass works at Gavin Brown. There were also nodes of out-and-out resistance, like the rather messy show that Ei Arakawa and Nora Schultz are making up as it goes along now on view at Spaulings (through Jan. 13).

Mind you, I complain about art fairs despite liking them quite a bit, especially if I don't have to leave town to see them. It is not the fairs themselves but the quantity and ubiquity of them that bother me. Because galleries are under a kind of strain; especially the newer ones that are the life's blood of any local art scene. Something somewhere has got to give. I hope it's not on the ground, but in the gleaming spaceship hovering overhead.

ARTFORUM

Beau Rutland on the best exhibitions in 2012

I'M TEMPTED HERE to list off some of the great monographic undertakings of 2012. They were certainly satisfying, but the year's instances of artists refusing to supply demand seem to be more memorable in the end.

What should have been a staid pairing of two bastions of art history, "Rembrandt and Dégas" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art left a surprisingly earnest impression of the young modernist, who defied academic standards by looking to the Dutch master's penumbral canvases for inspiration. The resulting exhibition included several self-portraits of a vulnerable artist worried over what he would amount to. To bring the (valid) cliché into the present, one can imagine young painters today being forced to reckon with anti-painting authority Michael Krebber or David Joselit's essays, deciding instead to look further back as a way of going forward.

Or, facing such pressures, one could always take the "deal with it!" approach. Whitney Clafin's solo exhibition at Thomas Erben, "As Long As You Get To Be Somebody's Slave, Too" debuted brash new abstractions by the painter. Barraged by feminine signifiers (bobby pins, a spandex dress, eyeshadow), varnished-on text, and thin staccato brushstrokes, Clafin's paintings offered up a self-aware notion of identity at uncomfortably close range. By marching unabashedly forward with an affable humor, the show suggests a certain determination and comfort in making an abstract painting this far into the medium's history.

As I was walking recently through MoMA's painting and sculpture galleries, the glint of a George Platt Lynes photograph caught me off guard—the backside of the lithe ephebe inspecting a Pavel Tchelitchew work didn't quite fit. "Artist's Choice: Trisha Donnelly," to which the displacement belongs, breathed fresh life into the museological apparatus, halting the narrative the institution labors to achieve. In this configuration, Futurism gives way not to Kandinsky but to Eliot Porter's mystifying and somehow uplifting jewel-toned avian portraits. Further along, Donnelly tightly packs a gallery with works depicting both human and natural subjects, all achingly familiar and easily resonant. "All of these works feel necessary to me. Each one is an epic entity," she states in the wall text. Donnelly's tightly wound installation reminds us that the previous capacious galleries had been filled with exclusions, both historical and social. Certain images, especially now in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, whether logs floating precariously close to low-hanging power lines or wave patterns in rippling water, evince a humanism seldom seen in this rarefied space. That Donnelly is able to provoke and awaken with the work of others speaks to the strengths of her associative practice and perhaps the fragility of this moment.

Beau Rutland is an art historian and curator based in New York.

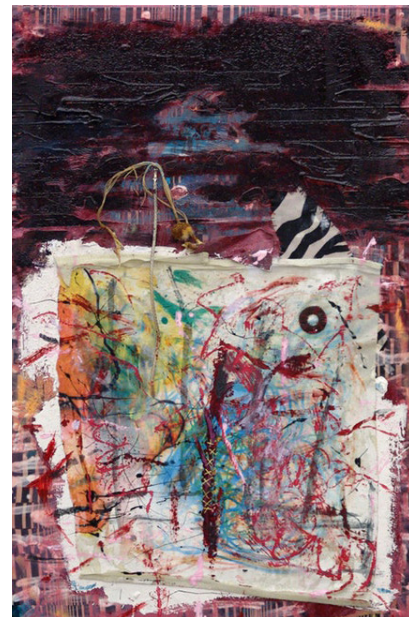


WHITNEY CLAFLIN As Long As You Get To Be Somebody's Slave, Too

Whitney Clafin is a young, Yale-educated painter who creates raw effects that remain in the thoughts of her viewers long after they have made their way from the gallery. Her surfaces are complex and often deliberately repellent; she belongs to a school of artists, à la Paul McCarthy, who want to confront their audience with work that remains consciously unattractive—as a way, I think, of refusing to succumb to the rules of the game. But Clafin is also a thoughtful and dedicated painter, so her strategy doesn't quite work—rather, we read her art carefully for the diversity of its surfaces and especially for the presence of words and phrases that are taped to the exterior layers of the paintings. Ironically (and likely despite her intentions), she sparks interest with an anti-Romanticist approach that can be every bit as mannered as works that mawkishly celebrate the worth of a particularly close friend. Her installation at the gallery even sported wine bottles covered with candle wax, lit and placed in small groups on the floor, as if to memorialize an old-fashioned bohemia that looks backward for inspiration. The work is all very tongue in cheek, so much so that the cynicism nearly overwhelms the visitor. But, as I have said, her exteriors are dense with signs and, therefore, demand more than a cursory reading.

“Don't Get Pissed Off at My Burnt Lips while the Noose Hangs Dry” (2012) dons a long list of materials, including a silk dress, razor blades, stickers, and earrings, just to mention the first four entries in the group. There are small, thin, curving black lines of paint against a sky-blue ground, along with patches of dotted fabric with flowers sewn onto the surface of the painting; safety pins, a zipper pull, and magazine clippings intensify the effects. Clafin also provides us with seemingly random phrases attached to the piece—a sampling includes “but, whatever”; “because the meaning”; and “the body played a role.” The lack of sense in Clafin's choice of language seems to be, generally speaking, an attempt to evade meaning in literary as well as visual ways. The question facing her audience is simple: Why would she eschew the traditional rhetoric of painting—a beautiful surface, a well-designed composition—in favor of an art that repudiates attractiveness? It is not an easy question to answer, but the fact that Clafin is forcing the question says a lot about the way she proceeds in her art. Inevitably, a predecessor such as Bruce Nauman, a champion of the ugly and the confrontational, comes to mind.

Rejecting pretense in favor of razor blades gives Clafin's art a seemingly untutored power that transcends the weight of sameness and history facing a young artist today. Her work, painted on a curtain and titled “Most Lies R Listening to Find You”(2012), is an inspired mess, complete with Spandex, marker, magazine clippings, and even a lyric object in the form of a sprig of dry flowers. More or less dead center is a printed note that reads as follows: “I'm not sure if you feel a spark, but I feel fireworks when I think of you.” Despite the complicated surface, replete with all manner of materials, Clafin manages to present her feelings to the audience. It is the ongoing cry of youth in love. Even so, it becomes clear that the artist's rough-hewn esthetic has its own emotional implications, which are urban, related to detritus, and more than slightly antagonistic toward naïve ideas of beauty. Clafin takes a lot of chances in her art, refusing to pull punches in favor of a graceful but meaningless surface. The result is unusual, even extraordinary.



Whitney Clafin, "Web of Lack/ IT IS MY GRAVE," 2012. Mixed media on found fabric, 23 x 15". Photo: Andreas Vesterlund. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York.

The New York Times

Like Watching Paint Thrive

The Big Picture

A penchant for small, modestly-scaled works that is often evident in these shows is at its most extreme at Sikkema Jenkins in “The Big Picture,” a slyly titled show of works by eight artists whose efforts rarely exceed 20 inches on a side.

An implication here is that small is not only beautiful but also might actually be radical, or at least anti-establishment, in a time of immense, often spectacular artworks. Another suggestion is that there remains plenty to be done with paint applied to small, flat rectangular surfaces.

These arguments are made effectively and repeatedly, whether by Jeronimo Elespe’s “Segundo T,” whose scratched patterns suggest a text or a textile as much as a painting; Merlin James’s resplendent “Yellow,” which simply pulses with small, well-placed blooms of color; or Ann Pibal’s latest, more forthright collusions of brushy and hard-edged abstraction. Through quietly inspired brushwork alone, David Schutter breathes his own kind of life into landscape-suggestive monochromes, while John Dilg brings the canvas weave to bear, almost pixelatedly, on his cartoon-visionary landscapes.

Robert Bordo, Josephine Halvorson and Ryan McLaughlin all make the case that art exists foremost for close looking and internalized experience and nothing does this better than painting. Other mediums can do it just as well, if we’re lucky, but not better.

For the moment three solo exhibitions supplement the conversation among these group shows in nearly mutually exclusive ways. In Cheyney Thompson’s installation (through Saturday) at Andrew Kreps (525 West 22nd Street) postwar gestural abstraction and Conceptual Art collide to bracing effect in a series of gaudy but weirdly methodical canvasses of identical height whose widths are proportioned to the walls on which they are displayed; never has Mr. Thompson’s sardonic skepticism about painting and its processes looked so fierce or decorative.

At Derek Eller (615 West 27th Street) André Ethier’s small canvasses (also through Saturday) mine the overlap between modernist and folk painting with a vibrant insouciance and could easily have been included in the Sikkema Jenkins show. And in her Manhattan gallery debut at Thomas Erben (526 West 26th Street) Whitney Clafin presents, through July 28, busily painted, also small canvasses enhanced by collage-poems, jewelry, sewn patches and feathers; they announce painting’s ability to absorb all comers in a whisper that is also a joyful shout.

Interview

WHITNEY CLAFLIN: WHEN THERE'S NO STARBUCKS NEARBY



“Isadora” 2012. Mixed media on canvas, 18 x 14 in.
Photo: Andreas Vesterlund, courtesy the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

For her solo show at Thomas Erben gallery, New York-based artist Whitney Clafin is drawing inspiration from the comedic greats—specifically, the iconic feminist stand-up and actress Sandra Bernhard. “When I was living in LA, I watched this Sandra Bernhard one-woman show, *Without You I’m Nothing*, and it really informed the way I use text and approach my work,” explains Clafin, who moved from Los Angeles to the East Coast to attend Yale’s MFA program in 2007. “The way she flips characters and voices—there are always so many layers of self-criticism and self-awareness, but also sincerity.”

This desire for emotional complexity and purposeful textual ambiguity forms the basis of Clafin’s current exhibition, a multimedia collection of cheekily tilted abstract oil paintings (*Forget the Salad* is

a deep blue, eyeshadow and feather-covered canvas), collages (e.g. the playful, Spandex-incorporating *Hates: Berets*, *Alexa Chung*, *When You Have to Pee Wicked Bad* and *There is No Starbucks Nearby*), and performance.

The performance, which takes place at the gallery at 7 pm tonight, is a sort of participatory parlor game-cum-self-mocking performance piece. “I have a girl posing as a kind of cliché of a New York performance artist, leading people in the gallery in a word game called ‘Impulse,’” says Clafin. “It’s a performance that isn’t really a performance, and it sets the tone for looking at the paintings.”