

ART REVIEW

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.

By Roberta Smith

Aug. 2, 2018

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.

Sam Gilliam’s “Homage to the Square” (2016-17) is one of the artist’s two large paintings featured in the Matthew Marks portion of the show. 2018 Sam Gilliam/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; David Kordansky Gallery

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.

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.

Robert Bechtle painted himself as a kind of mystic in “North Adams Studio,” from 2008.
Robert Bechtle/Gladstone Gallery

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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 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.

An installation view of Karl Wirsum’s colorful toy-robot-figures, “Sputter in the Niche of Time” (2009), left, and “Toot Toot Tutu Toodle-oo” (2013), at the Matthew Marks space at 522 West 22nd Street. Sean Logue

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.

“Dahlias and Birch Trees,” from 2004, is one of Lois Dodd’s 10 small oil studies of nature in the survey. Lois Dodd/Greene Naftali Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery

Luchita Hurtado's "Untitled," from 1970.

Luchita Hurtado/Greene Naftali Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery

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 outsize 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.

Leidy Churchman's "Paradise 8 & 9," from 2018. Aaron Wax

Jana Euler's "Shape of Painting, Summer Hit 2017," from 2018.
Jana Euler/dépendance, Brussels and Greene Naftali

Alex Israel's "Self-Portrait (Neon)," 2018, at Greene Naftali. Alex Israel/Greene Naftali

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.

Rodney McMillian's "TBD" (2017) at Greene Naftali Gallery. Gustavo Murillo

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.

Painting: Now and Forever, Part III

Through Aug. 17 at the three exhibition spaces of Matthew Marks Gallery and the two spaces of Greene Naftali Gallery, all in Chelsea; 212-243-0200, matthewmarks.com; 212-463-7770, greenenaftaligallery.com.

Correction: August 2, 2018

An earlier version of this article misidentified the year that Leidy Churchman was born. He was born in 1979, not 1987.

Roberta Smith, the co-chief art critic, regularly reviews museum exhibitions, art fairs and gallery shows in New York, North America and abroad. Her special areas of interest include ceramics textiles, folk and outsider art, design and video art. @robertasmithnyt

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