
ART • WEEKEND

Taking Stock of Painting Today

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John Yau August 12, 2018

Lois Dodd, "Window, Deserted House" (1979), oil on linen, 52 x 52 inches (© Lois Dodd, courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery and Greene Naftali)

It is not every day that you can go to Chelsea and see more than 100 paintings by 46 artists within the space of a few blocks, but that is exactly what will happen if you go to the

sprawling group show, *Painting: Now and Forever, Part III*, at the multiple exhibition spaces of the [Matthew Marks Gallery](#) and [Greene Naftali](#) (June 28 – August 17, 2018). Other than stating that the exhibition “includes over forty international artists working in a wide array of styles [proving] the vitality of contemporary painting,” the press release makes no grand statement or claim. The roster of participants is all over the place. There are living and dead artists hailing from a dozen countries, ranging from famous to established to neglected to up-and-coming – a fascinating hodge-podge.

This is the third presentation of an ongoing survey of painting, organized once every ten years since 1998, when Matthew Marks and Pat Hearn, who died in 2000, first put it on. This exhibition was put together by the staffs of Marks and Greene Naftali, which may explain why no one is listed as curator. It may also explain its lack of a center, which might put off some people, but I didn't mind it a bit

I saw the entire show twice, first to see what was in it and make a list of what caught my eye, which enabled me to be slightly more purposeful when I went around again. I think a show like this does its job if it achieves the following: it makes you want to see more work by some of the artists; it includes the work of an artist you feel is neglected and deserving of more attention; it introduces you to work by someone you did not know of before. Both galleries include some of their own artists, which is to be expected. However, the row of small acrylic stripe paintings by Nayland Blake from the mid-1990s and the two still-lives by Gedi Sibony from 2017-2018 were gratuitous gestures by artists who made their name working in other mediums. They used paint but that was about as far as it went.

The artist who had the most work in the exhibition was Lois Dodd, who is in her early 90s (in a highly belated act of institutional recognition, the first monograph on her work was published only last year). In 1951, shortly after returning from Italy, Dodd began working in the Maine landscape where she was spending the summer. For nearly 70 years now she has been painting the world before her eyes. In the most ordinary circumstances she finds a fresh and engaging view, which she transforms into a painting.

Painting: Now and Forever, Part III at
Matthew Marks Gallery: installation view
(image via matthewmarks.com)

Along with “Window, Deserted House”
(1979) and “Night Window – Red Curtain”
(1972), there are “Burning House, Night, with
Fireman” (2015), and 10 oil paintings done on

sheets of aluminum flashing measuring five by seven inches. Done quickly on a smooth, resistant surface, they are of dewdrops on grass, the full moon in a night sky, and a view from a barn window.

Spread out across all three of Marks’s exhibition spaces, these paintings alone are a good enough reason to see the show. Artists know how good Dodd is, even if museum curators are too busy looking around for the next hot young artist. Recently, Robert Gober gave Dodd’s painting, “View through Elliot’s Shack Looking South” (1971), to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, which, if the museum website is correct, is the first painting by this artist to enter the collection.

With MoMA's shortsightedness in mind, I want to call attention to a handful of artists, most of whom are neglected, hardly known, or unknown in New York: Xinyi Cheng, Leidy Churchman, Ed Clark, Luchita Hurtado, Matsumi Kanemitsu, Bhupen Khakar, Suellen Rocca, and Eiichi Shibata. Works by this group alone would constitute an interesting exhibition.

Clark, an African American abstract artist, was born in 1926, a year before Dodd, and, along with Matsumi Kanemitsu (1922 – 1992) is considered part of the second generation of Abstract Expressionists. Clark's "Untitled" (1991) and "TBC (HS #94)" (2005) were painted with a broom, an instrument he began using in the early 1950s while living in Paris. The sensual swaths of creamy, billowing color are erotic and delicate; the slowness of the paint's movement across the surface offers a distinct counterpoint to the speed and fury we associate with Abstract Expressionism.

Matsumi Kanemitsu, "Untitled (A)"
(1956), acrylic on canvas, 28 x 28 inches
(© The Kanemitsu Collection, courtesy of
Louis Stern Fine Arts)

In 2008, I first saw and reviewed a small selection of Kanemitsu's lithographs and works on paper at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, but I have never seen a painting of his until now. Long before I saw

any of his work, I knew the name Kanemitsu from "Personal Poem" by Frank O'Hara, which I first read in 1971. Imagine my delight in coming across an Asian-sounding name in a poem by a New York School poet: "Now when I walk around at lunchtime/I have only two charms in my pocket/an old Roman coin Mike Kanemitsu gave me [...]." I did not learn that Kanemitsu was an artist until the early 1980s and that it was Jackson Pollock who gave him the nickname "Mike." Nearly 50 years after reading his name I finally got to see a painting done around the time he was living in New York and knew O'Hara. I was not disappointed.

Kanemitsu, whose biography reads like the script for a movie that Hollywood will never make unless they can get a white actor to play the part, was born in Ogden, Utah, but raised by his grandparents in a suburb outside Hiroshima from 1925 until 1940 (during which time he learned calligraphy and the use of Sumi brush). A dual citizen, he returned to America and was drafted into the US Army, but with the country's entry into World War II after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he was arrested and sent to internment camps, where he began drawing with materials given to him by the American Red Cross. Later in the war, he was

granted permission to serve as an army nurse in Europe, where he stayed on after the war ended and studied with Fernand Leger in Paris (as did Robert Colescott). Returning to the States, he settled in New York, where he studied with Yasuo Kuniyoshi, at the Art Students League. In 1961, invited by June Wayne to work at the Tamarind print workshop, he moved to Los Angeles, California.

Kanemitsu, who painted in Japanese sumi ink and brushes his entire life, recognized that he had multiple identities – something reflected in his work multiple mediums, which he never tried to unite under a single style. This is why seeing paintings by Kanemitsu in this show was so important to me; they offered a glimpse into a side of him I did not know. “Untitled (A)” (1956) was done the year Kanemitsu was included in a Whitney Annual, and his other painting in the exhibition, “Untitled (C)” (ca. 1969) is from more than a decade later, and after he moved to Los Angeles.

The bulbous blue shape hanging down from the painting’s top edge in “Untitled (A)” anticipates a shape that Paul Feeley began using in 1957 in paintings such as “Kilroy” (1957). If the dates of Kanemitsu’s paintings are any indication, he was at the forefront of artists who rejected both the gestural and strict geometrical aspects of Abstract Expressionism in favor of rounded forms and solid planes of color. His work is right there in the mix with Feeley’s classical forms and Nicholas Krushenick’s Pop abstractions and yet remains neglected, at best. His absence from an art history that is just getting around to acknowledging its nonwhite artists is telling.

Luchita Hurtado, “Untitled” (1970), oil on canvas, 32 7/8 x 19 1/8 inches (© Luchita Hurtado, courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery and Greene Naftali)

I feel as if I am going back in time in order to arrive at the present. Luchita Hurtado was born in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1920, before Kanemitsu and Clark. Her breakthrough moment happened in 2016, at the age of 95,

when she had a solo show of her abstract works from 1940s and ‘50s at the Park View (since renamed Park View/Paul Soto) in Los Angeles. Two years later, she was one of 30 artists included in the Hammer Museum’s biennial exhibition, *Made in LA 2018*, curated by Anne Ellegood.

Hurtado has four paintings in *Painting Now and Forever, Part III*, three from the 1970s and one from the '80s. "Untitled" (1970), is a truncated first-person view of a woman looking down at her own body and basket near her feet. The woven basket, along with the tubular bead necklace around the woman's neck, suggest that the view of one's body is affected by the culture that one was born into. The directness and immediacy of this painting is complicated by her two other canvases from the 1970s, one of which depicts feathers falling against a backdrop of blue sky. Hurtado, who was married to Wolfgang Paalen and to Lee Mullican, and is the mother of the artist Matt Mullican, is one of the revelations of this exhibition. Clearly, she has been making strong work for many decades. She deserves a serious look at her work, a museum survey show at the very least.

Hurtado's "Untitled" is directly across from two paintings by Xinyi Cheng, the youngest artist in the exhibition. Born in Wuhan, China, in 1989, Cheng studied in China and the US and currently lives in Amsterdam, Netherlands. In "Harnessing the Wind" (2018), we see a cropped view of a male body, focusing on the lower torso and genitals. The body, seeming to fall backward, is flattened into a modernist space and crammed within the painting's confines. Cheng does not explain the circumstances. While the use of a tonal palette might be something she took from Luc Tuymans, the imagery is clearly her own. Cheng is a painter whose work you want to see more of.

Xinyi Cheng, "Harnessing the Wind" (2018), oil on linen, 19 3/4 x 15 3/4 inches (© Xinyi Cheng, courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery and Greene Naftali)

This is also true of Leidy Churchman, who has five paintings in the exhibition, spread across two gallery spaces. It is surprising when you discover that the same artist did them all, since they don't look remotely alike.

The largest, "Paradise 8 & 9" (2018), is a view of a path lined with trees receding into the background, as seen in an opened magazine whose pages are nearly synonymous with the painting's surface. Churchman seems highly conscious of, as well as conflicted by, certain pictorial images and tropes, and how they have been used to evoke transcendence.

Although Bhupen Khakhar (1934 – 2003) was the subject of a retrospective, *Bhupen Khakhar: You Can't Please All* at the Tate Modern (June 1 – November 16, 2016), and was championed by Howard Hodgkin, he remains virtually unknown in the US. Khakhar, who worked as an accountant until he was in his mid-20s, is

largely a self-taught painter who absorbed a lot from Indian folk art and hand-painted advertising signs. An autobiographical artist, he often explored the daily life of being homosexual in postwar India.

“In a Boat” (1984) is a night scene of a boatful of nude and partially clothed men partying and pairing up. In a twist, Khakar depicts a clothed Pablo Picasso, seen in profile, sitting at the stern of the boat, looking at the water, estranged from the others. Directly across from him, on the other side of the boat, sits what could be Picasso’s twin: he too is clothed and not paired up. The famous voyeur is neither looking at his doppelgänger nor at what is going on around him. There is something incredibly smart, wry, assured, tender, and provocative about this work, which is beautifully painted.

Bhupen Khakhar, “In a Boat” (1984), oil on canvas, 67 3/4 x 68 1/8 inches (© Estate of Bhupen Khakhar, courtesy of Shumita and Arani Bose Collection, NY)

What I see connecting the masterful Dodd with all the artists I have cited, as well as with the glorious Suellen Rocca and the outsider artist Eiichi Shibata, is an interest in discovering what paint can do: what qualities of its materiality and color can be brought into play. Rocca’s two paintings, which were done in the past few years, show that she has moved past her work of the 1960s, with which she first gained attention, into a domain of the female body transported into a state of luminous ecstasy. As with Hurtado, here is another artist who is long overdue for a serious survey and monograph, which begs the question: if you are not white and male, do you have to be like Khakhar, safe in heaven dead, before such thinking and looking might begin, especially in New York?

There is a lot of terrific work in the show, much of it by artists who have already received heaps of praise. I figured they did not need more. Also, one can play the game of who was left out of this show, as one of my colleagues has done, but I think that is beside the point. With so much in *Painting: Now and Forever, Part III* to see and think about, grousing about who is not in it diminishes those who are.

Painting: Now and Forever, Part III continues at [Matthew Marks Gallery](#) (522 & 526 West 22nd Street; 523 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) and [Greene Naftali](#) (508 West 26 Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through August 17.

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