

Morgan Lehman opens "The Twenty by Sixteen Biennial Curated by Geoffrey Young"



Installation view. Photo: Courtesy Morgan Lehman Gallery.

NEW YORK, NY. - Only space prevents this show from being twice as large as it is, so fecund is the visual scene of the moment, so anxious the times.

Though this biennial is limited to 40 artists, each is represented by two works. Biennial, because Morgan Lehman did a 20 x 16 show two years ago, and they will do one again, two years hence. Twenty inches tall by sixteen inches wide is the deal: size as constraint becoming a tool to hint at the range of choices in painting today. As limits challenge, limits generate. Artists respond in the language they speak. What kinds of babble, hardscrabble, reticence, rockabilly, poetry and pleasure might be found in a show of this kind?

Turns out that no two artists look the same, nor are likely to be confused with one

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another. In works graphic, florid, narrative, mathematical, emptied, dense, punk, daft, academic, felicitous, and dutiful we begin to get the answer.

If the dominant movie of the today's news cycle crashes before sundown most days — the lies and outrages outed with necessary dispatch — let's hear it for art's story which endures, giving nuance, feeling, and value to the moment. Not alternate facts: art is an alternate world, a mad charge of loving energy suffusing human achievement.

How various the compositions that share these walls, how unpredictable the shapes, decisions, visual arrays. Color, held under strict supervision by some, is unleashed by others, champing at the bit. Formal eloquence, the sine qua non of several, is abjured by those eager to stir things up. Flat or volumetric, illusionistic or unmoored, these works establish their own languages, deliver their own soliloquies, are witnesses to their own dramas, with or without an audience.

What we bring to a show of this kind depends on hunger and curiosity. A challenge to taste, "Twenty by Sixteen" is an invitation to revel in art's post-history, a chance to take the measure of a time when anything goes, especially if this "anything" has imagination, integrity and merit on its own terms. As Thelonious Monk said when asked about the meaning of his music: "I lay it down, you pick it up." These artists have laid it down, now we must do the rest, if we would know the beauty, feel the joy, apprehend the uncertainty, praise the solutions, and yes, reach for the meaning.

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