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John Haber
in New York City

7.21.17 — FAIRS WITHOUT TOURISTS

By John Haber | Posted: July 21st, 2017

Summer group shows are like art fairs without the tourists and collectors. They carry the same promises and the same dreadful sense of obligation, even as the crowds have left town—perhaps for another art fair.

The summer of 2017 brings little in the way of a trend, but then a trend is hard to find anywhere now apart from anything goes. To add to the confusion, a dozen galleries even mimic art fairs by hosting artists from galleries from out of town and abroad. This year does, though, bring some more than halfway creative shows. They include unthemed recaps and creative themes. Ellen Berkenblit brings much the same verve to women, horses, and color fields that reach out to you. Summer also includes abstraction with more than a hint of landscape by Francisco Ugarte, Shara Hughes, and Patricia Treib.

Business as usual

Art fairs without gawkers and buyers must sound like galleries without artists or a future—but I would not rule that out either, alas. It might be the last remaining avant-garde. Yet summer shows do make me think of fair week. They, too, offer the chance to take stock or to catch up. Bitforms even calls its show a fall preview, including video as sculpture in, he explains, four dimensions by Gary Hill and swirling video colors by Sara Ludy. Like fairs again, they also tempt me to sit them out.



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Who needs yet another forced theme or unthemed sprawl? Not that recaps of old and new friends are all bad. Canada gallery makes clear that it has some shocks left, with a full room of streaming black cords by Heather Watkins approaching life forms—and with art between torn clothing and posters by Kristan Kennedy visible on the back wall. Lennon, Weinberg allows gallery artists like Jill Moser and Melissa Meyer to choose counterparts and influences that, often as not, blend right in. A stalwart defender of abstraction like McKenzie can approach routine, but several artists there go big, including Plexiglas triangles high on the wall by Doreen McCarthy and wide brushstrokes by Andrea Belag. Don Voisine shows that he need not use black to add translucency or to unsettle his symmetry.

Not all themes are forced either. At their best, they may even sound routine. In the case of women artists, make that overdue to sound routine, and Michael Rosenfeld makes the point in its exhibition's title, "The Time Is Now." It also has the commitment and resources for a credible history. It outdid the Studio Museum in Harlem with its survey of Alma Thomas, who again appears. So do the likes of Magdalena Abakanowicz, Grace Hartigan, Louise Nevelson, Lee Krasner, and Joan Mitchell.

Not everything, though, is a textbook history of the late twentieth century. In accord with its program, the gallery includes such black artists as Thomas, Betye Saar, and Barbara Chase-Riboud. It also reaches back to Surrealism by Dorothea Tanning, Kay Sage, and Irene Rice Pereira, along with early fabric art by Lenore Tawney. Lee Lozano looks unusually sleek in her machine-inspired abstraction. Perhaps the first drip painter gets her due as well. Janet Sobel was not just an outsider artist.

Galerie Lelong, too, has a shot at what is becoming the usual. After retrospectives of Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape, plus one coming up for Hélio Oiticica, it must seem that museums can no longer get enough of Latin American art or Neo-Concretism. Yet one can almost forget that Grupo Frente in Brazil was indeed a movement—one that could make the elements of geometric abstraction pop. "**Brushless**" at Morgan Lehman has to sound like more business as usual. A roller, a rubbing, or a palette knife should not come as a surprise, not even in such capable hands. Still, poured paint from Carolanna Parlato, shaped by tilting the canvas, and hard edges by Halsey Hathaway, made with an atomizer, had me wondering that they pulled it off.

The most ambitious theme may well be the simplest, with two full floors of "White Heat" at Marc Straus, for all its limits. It cannot offer white painting by Alberto Burri, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Agnes Martin, Valerie Jaudon, or Robert Ryman—or lattices of white cubes by Sol LeWitt. It includes sculpture, where a patina of white is more an option than a reduction, even with deadly nightshade covered in frost by Jeanne Silverthorne or a brutal torso by Nicole Eisenman, like a horse by Raymond Duchamp-Villon as a frat boy. Mostly, it eschews color in favor of a textured surface, with Europeans more concerned for elegance than a revolution. Yet it, too, reminds me of summer. Even in off season for galleries, the heat is on.

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Reaching for you

Ellen Berkenblit makes you step back, only to wonder what you missed. You step back from big canvases, big colors, and plenty of black. You step back from a horse rearing in profile in the darkness, lest it trample you, or an umbrella in a cage, lest it poke you in the face. You step back from a bulbous foot and ankle with a single toe, lest it kick you in the face. You step back from a hand plucking a flower, as *Tincture of Musk*, to avoid the smell. Besides, those archly curved fingers with their red nail polish could instead be reaching for you.

Berkenblit is always in your face, and the greater part of you might like it that way. You might even wish that she were reaching for you. She paints pleasures and temptations, with a small cast that boils down to just that horse and just that woman, as obvious projections of the artist. She means them to project a long way. You do not step back as you would for the majestic symmetry of an abstraction by Jackson Pollock, say, or the busy narrative of Paolo Veronese in the Renaissance, but rather for the comic energy of a pointy nose out a graphic novel. Just bear in mind that she may be laughing at you.

You may not find it so easy to laugh along with her. More often, the horse looks slightly down and slightly sad, but still larger the life. The woman appears at her most confident striding across and into the canvas, past still more flowers, wearing only a velvet ribbon around her neck. The horse faces an American flag with colors wildly at odds with reality, and the woman's skin is a peculiar shade of violet. The colors could be unsettling the painting or you. Berkenblit works in layers and gestures, with a brush or palette knife. Those blacks may combine colors, bright colors may have warmer underpainting, and hard edges may dissolve halfway into shadow.

The comic-strip outlines and surfeit of flesh are heirs to Carroll Dunham, although with more attention to painting. They have just as much to do with the characters bordering on abstraction common to art right now, although never quite as slippery. They do not inhabit the anxious allegories of Dana Schutz or the enigmatic interiors of Patricia Treib. They may look to Henri Matisse for their large fields of color, but without the classicism. They are just too concerned for sensuality. Berkenblit may paint over charcoal or over calico, ever mindful of what she exposes or effaces.

When it comes to sex, you may miss the irony of Eric Fischl, the sheer madness of Carol Rama before him, or a more self-conscious feminism. Berkenblit can seem by comparison way too obvious and a little too self-involved. She is, though, always a painter and never quite what she seems. A title like *I Don't Object If You Call Collect* could be rapping or indulgent. A title for the striding woman, *V*, could announce victory or just plain drawing. She really could be reaching for you.

Just upstairs, Nicole Eisenman puts flesh on the line as well—and with much the same comic crudity. Eisenman has made brutal free-standing sculpture, but she has a greater

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reputation for mask-like faces in paint. Here she works between the two, in wall reliefs and related works on paper. They run the gamut of expressions and assemblages. Yet their roots in pop culture and found imagery are hard to pin down. They exist for that tempting space in-between.

Beyond the horizon



Summer brings New Yorkers outdoors—and early summer in the galleries brings the outdoors in. Sometimes it seems that abstract art can encompass anything, but sometimes, too, it is rooted in landscape. Francisco Ugarte brings the outside in ingeniously, with a single brushstroke. It may be only the illusion of a brushstroke, but then it is only the illusion of a landscape as well. Ugarte restricts himself to the mark of a loaded brush, like a simpler David Reed, dragged across the center of an empty field—and then he recreates or reimagines the mark, painstakingly, on paper or canvas. The black acrylic gathers and scatters, while also drawing thin and leaving the fainter lines of individual bristles.

This art is determinedly abstract, but a video makes it hard to ignore the resemblance to a horizon line or the texture of rock and soil. It shows hills going nowhere fast, perhaps near his native Guadalajara, as the backdrop to a whiter and more inscrutable plain, while a car crosses much like his brush. Past work has used paint tubes and shadows to conjure up model cities and foil-wrapped furniture to bring the discomforts of an arid landscape indoors, but here things stay plainer. Ugarte subtitles each work *Brushstroke*. And then he calls the show "Three Lines, One Square" to insist that he is only painting lines. As for the square, I never found it, but (like the brushstroke) it may have broken up some time before.

Shara Hughes is more summery and a lot less summary. It takes a whole show to discover the abstraction in her abstract landscapes or studio interiors. Her all-over painting looks representational enough, like Pierre Bonnard on steroids. The sheer density of dabs puts vegetation at its center. Some images, though, become harder to make out, apart from exercises in mostly primary colors. Taken together, as in 2017 Whitney Biennial or an earlier show of "Post-Analog Painting," they become a compendium of approaches to making a painting.

Patricia Treib is cleaner, but the compendium is there all the same. She combines firm edges with looser strokes to deepen her warm colors. Although their flatness may

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recall Henri Matisse and his cutouts, they go well beyond primaries to include browns and purplish blues. She also gives her color fields plenty of room to breathe. Their curves may overlap, or they may nestle up against one another without touching. The show's very title calls attention to the "Interstices."

That leaves the emphasis on the shapes. They may seem abstracted away from a profile or the dowels of old furniture, and the domesticity lends them a greater calm. And then the wiggles keep things moving again. One might even interpret a shape here and there as a large Greek letter. Pattern and Decoration, Pop Art, folk art, color-field painting, expressionism—none of the labels seems quite right. That is much of what makes the paintings interesting.

All these artists belong to the revival of abstraction, but without the formulaic scale and brushwork of "zombie formalism." Treib especially messes things up. They also offer an alternative to the frequent invasion of the human figure into abstraction. They can still have even diehard fans of abstract painting like me wondering. As I have to keep asking myself, when anything goes, where is painting going? For now, it is happily preoccupied with itself.

The most ambitious theme may well be the simplest, with two full floors of "White Heat" at Marc Straus (through July 30), for all its limits. It cannot offer white painting by Alberto Burri, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Agnes Martin, Valerie Jaudon, or Robert Ryman—or lattices of white cubes by Sol LeWitt. It includes sculpture, where a patina of white is more an option than a reduction, even with deadly nightshade covered in frost by Jeanne Silverthorne or a brutal torso by Nicole Eisenman, like a horse by Raymond Duchamp-Villon as a frat boy. Mostly, it eschews color in favor of a textured surface, with Europeans more concerned for elegance than a revolution. Yet it, too, reminds me of summer. Even in off season for galleries, the heat is on.