

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

The Pursuit of Aesthetics: Artwork Created During Quarantine

By [William Corwin](#)



Andrea Belag, *Birdwatcher*, 2020. Oil on linen, 42 x 48 inches. Courtesy Morgan Lehman.

This certainly seems like a time for image and text: straightforward and direct gestures for marshalling ideas, crowds, and righteous fury. So one has to stop and collect a

reeling brain, full of protest acronyms and painful or ghastly YouTube footage, in order to focus on the premise of an exhibition that emphasizes, as its title suggests, “*The Pursuit of Aesthetics*.” Curator Andrea Belag has chosen 12 artists, including herself, as a representative sample set of abstract artists working away in quarantine. The exhibition proposes a methodology for artists in times of crisis which suggests to me the idea of “sheltering from the storm”—using aesthetic experience as a respite from the chaos and upheaval around us. Certainly, much of the art that Belag has chosen, as well as what she has made, is sensuous and atmospheric, works that mesmerize and transport. Lucy Mink-Covello’s shimmering topographies of undulating marks and Kevin Larmon’s understated, almost monochromatic, bubbling amoebic stew recalibrate the rhythms of our perception, if only for a moment. Margaux Ogden’s canvases evoke ethereal mosaics or stained glass, while Emily Kiacz weighs the randomness of loose and open, but carefully choreographed, brushstrokes against the permanence of sharp-edged shaped canvases. Although the idea of taking shelter in aesthetics might seem suspect at this moment, I think there is still value in providing a space for some to clear their thoughts and recharge their sensibilities. Nonetheless, as we plunge into examinations of formal composition, texture, and mark-making, such questions cannot help but feel foreign at this particular time



The inclination to identify something concrete that abstract paintings may be referencing is hard to avoid, and painters either embrace this train of thought or move heaven and earth to avoid it. Belag’s own paintings *Fold* and *Birdwatcher* (all works in

the show are 2020) favor a tone of pure abstraction. Her sweeping, exuberant, and hybrid brushstrokes of diverse colors extend across a pristine and empty background. Fitfully, they guide the eye along an arching path, presenting a singular but patchworked gesture, “encompassing multitudes.” Belag utilizes the varying degrees of liquidity allowed by the brush to destabilize any recognizable pattern or geometry, never mind real-world reference. Jason Stopa, with his *Study for Washed Out Stage with Pin Window* and *Study for Garden Arch*, presents two approximations of architectural structure which lure the eye with the simplest visual cues of depth, space, doorways, and fenestration. However, a sense of concrete reference ultimately remains elusive, leaving the viewer with more of a sense of what these forms are *not*, than what they are.

By highlighting artists working in quarantine, Belag raises the question: what do most artists do when they're not under quarantine? The answer is that, in terms of their studio practice, most artists already live in a form of self-inflicted isolation, so really they shouldn't be doing much different. One reassuring aspect of this exhibition's “shelter-from-the-storm” sensibility is the sense of safety and consistency we find in artists just getting on with it. Pam Glick, Lisa Corinne Davis, and Julian Kreimer all engage in esoteric and calligraphic forms of diagramming. These works may be unsettlingly frenetic, but they face inwards, seemingly exploring the roiling of the artist's psyche. Perhaps these troughs and peaks, cross-outs, or flows sharply doubling on themselves are quarantine angst, but they seem consistent with pre-existing work—and consistency is a comfort. These three artists, however, diverge substantially in their aesthetic approaches. Davis interrogates the concept of mapping, treating it as a visual form that paradoxically deploys structures of great conceptual regularity to reveal and present difference. Kreimer offers another way of conceiving the task of charting, stressing movement as flows of vibrant and colorful cross-hatching interweave through patches and phrases of pooled pigment, textures, and patterns. His forms can be read visually or assigned a set of metaphorical values: we wonder if they refer to topographies of greater or lesser intensity, especially armed with the knowledge that Kreimer's practice tends to straddle the line separating representation and abstraction. Pam Glick's compositions resemble gameboards, laying out floral nodes and bone-like passages that seem to draw the eye in a predetermined trajectory or pattern. However, they ultimately collapse into a pleasant, but messy, wild goose chase.

Does the vaguely defined discourse of aesthetics have any responsibility to reflect on immediate history as it transpires? Can this even be accomplished through abstract art? There is a gently polemical subtext here that addresses the uses and responsibilities of pure abstraction. While Glick's painterly cross-outs and the frenetically unsettling activity of Kreimer's compositions could be identified with the spirit of the time, Lisa

Beck's work seems to invite such associations even more directly, with colors that peer out from behind a dark brooding veil of unpredictability. *Breaking Out* and *Mars Black*, for example, toy with the astrological notion of an unknowable truth hidden behind indiscernible celestial veils. It may be simply that veils and curtains of color, or enigmatically obscured forms, trigger a sense of dread or loss. Indeed, we see variations on this theme throughout the exhibition. Laura Newman straddles metaphorical architecture and abstract notions of becoming with black and fractured forms in *Portal*, but an emerging rainbow ultimately overpowers the crumbling structure of the foreground. Adrienne Elise Tarver insinuates recognizable forms such as hands and vegetal fronds into a miasmatic, all-over bed of blurry color. She takes an alternative tack from the other artists included here, and chooses to heighten the abstract qualities of the known, rather than attempting to generate unknown sensations from whole cloth. Andrea Belag's choices in *The Pursuit of Aesthetics* provide inspiration and rejuvenation for those who sorely need it, as well as reassurance that the intersection of political transformation and natural disaster has not necessarily thrown artists from their paths.