

CUTTING A FINE FIGURE: AROUND NEW YORK
ON SHOWS AT THE WHITNEY MUSEUM, HESTER, SUBAL, FEUER/
MESLER, BEAUCHENE, HANLEY, LUXEMBOURG & DAYAN,
ZWIRNER, AND CANADA

by Andrew Russeth



Mathew Cerletty, *Shelf Life*, 2015, oil on canvas, 50 x 60. Whitney Museum.
EPW STUDIO, NEW YORK/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND OFFICE BAROQUE, BRUSSELS

For what seems like ages, New York's galleries have been awash in abstract painting of the bland and derivative variety. But the past few years have seen the emergence of a batch of exciting young figurative painters who, though their concerns are varied, share a number of intriguing characteristics: they are attuned to humor (slapstick looms large), fixated on the body, rapacious in their mining of both art history and the broader culture (from TV to Internet memes), and most of all, determined to impart pleasure. Lately it has felt like this particular mode of representation—slick, punchy, and outré—is cresting over into something like a movement, or at least a moment.

"Flatlands" at the Whitney Museum (January 14–April 17) brings together five closely watched painters working in diverse, distinct ways within that fertile zone: Nina Chanel Abney, Mathew Cerletty, Jamian Juliano-Villani, Caitlin Keogh, and Orion Martin. Impressively au courant, the show is a smart, concise affair organized by Whitney curators Laura Phipps and Elisabeth Sherman. "Today, the virtual hyperconnectivity of our daily lives masks a disconnect from the physical world, leading to a yearning for the tactile," they write in a cautious essay. "Representational art answers this desire to be tethered to reality at a time when the world around us feels so insecure." That is not to say that the painted worlds depicted here feel safe. These artists take up the language of the screen—flattened, polished, even corporate—and use it toward dangerous ends. Meaning is in disarray, contested, in their scenes. All hell is breaking loose.

Employing high-key color, a subtly cartoon-influenced approach to rendering shapes and spaces, and a heroic attention to detail, Cerletty imparts startling uncanniness to seemingly quotidian objects and scenes. In the immaculately rendered *Shelf Life* (2015), the star of the show, he places the viewer inside a fish tank, amid fish and seaweed. He's also contributed paintings of a richly sequined vest and a moonlit field, this last something like a Ralph Albert Blakelock turned into a kitsch screensaver—which is to say that, like many of his compatriots, Cerletty happily, giddily brushes aside any sense of good taste. (The flattening in the

show's title is multivalent.)

Martin, perhaps the least established figure here, shares Cerletty's zest for singular, potent images that expose the surrealism and sublimity lurking just beneath the surface of the everyday. His paintings also begin with ostensibly straightforward things—a tightly laced, high-heeled boot, a taut configuration of ropes—but he amps them up with precise details and sly moves in the direction of abstraction. They recall what William N. Copley (a lodestar for many in this gang) referred to as “ridiculous objects”: items that take on erotic, libidinal attributes through obsessive examination. Martin's works are filled with holes, laces, knots. Concerned with penetration, vulnerability, and bondage, they prick and thrill.

Juliano-Villani and Keogh are in a camp concerned with sharp juxtapositions, crisply splicing together disparate subjects in the same painting, though the former artist handily outmatches the latter. Keogh works big in acrylic, rendering concatenations of images—a skeleton in a book, flowers, and garlands in one piece here—in an ultra-flat coloring-book style, which is decorative and polite and which also, I am sorry to say, quickly grows monotonous. In contrast, Juliano-Villani, wielding an airbrush, makes wild scenes that overflow with impossible-to-place references and styles. In one, a man made of orange-and-white traffic cones bounds over a patch of rocks. In another, a teddy bear sits behind the club-secured steering wheel of a car. Her paintings serve up punch lines, even while radiating delicious evil.

Abney's unlikely muse is Stuart Davis at his most colorful and syncopated. She is represented by a single sprawling painting divided into four panels, in which naked women—black and white—bend over to expose themselves, while buzzy shapes and words—“NO,” “YES,” “HOES”—dance about their bodies. It is a startling piece—the blocky, almost childlike writing clashing with the frank nudity—and could be read, perhaps, as a depiction of digital space at its most brusque, clogged with pornography, comments, and orders.

Bodies are everywhere in this ascendant imagist mode, but they are never fixed or stable. They are under attack, being torn apart, morphing into something else, or evanescing. In the tasty “Untitled Body Parts” at Simone Subal Gallery (January 10–February 7), a painting by the excellent Emily Mae Smith (a leader in this emergent field) showed a chiseled torso overlaid with short lengths of brass tubing. The work is titled after Picabia, whose playful figuration is another touchstone for these painters. The inspiration for the exhibition was the late, great Austrian American Pop artist Kiki Kogelnik, whose works, filled with neon bodies flying in every direction, prefigure a lot of today's exuberant figuration. An especially prescient piece by Kogelnik consists of cutout vinyl bodies draped over a clothes hanger, like so many identities, or avatars, ready to be donned—or perhaps already discarded in favor of new ones. Also here were works by Mira Dancy and Sanya Kantarovsky, strong exponents of this new painting who channel bits of early 20th-century modernism toward, respectively, sensual and self-deprecating ends.

At Hester, in a tidy group show called “The Grove” (January 10–February 14), Joshua Nathanson pushed bodies even deeper into the digital ether with alluring paintings filled with clouds of oranges, purples, and peaches. In *Girl Leaving* (2015), the girl in question is a dandelion head with an ambiguous smile and a stick-figure body.

Let's pause here to note that a significant portion of this figuration rides whimsically on a wave of easy nostalgia—for early modernism, for children's books, or, in the case of Jane Corrigan, who had a solo show, “EvilActivity123,” at Feuer/Mesler (January 9–February 14), for the covers of Nancy Drew volumes. Corrigan's brushy numbers star the protagonists of such young-adult novels—lithe, energetic figures exploring haunted houses and spooky forests, flashlights in hand. They are undeniably attractive scenes. They are also, considered as finished artworks, rather slight.

Over at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, in his first New York solo show, “The Skin I Live In” (January 8–February 7), the British artist Jonathan Baldock also appeared to have been informed by Kogelnik in body-minded pieces he made by sewing limbs—felt arms and legs—and dots (pink, white, and blue) in decorous arrangements onto burlap, but the end result is too staid,

too restrained. They are like Kogelniks or Dorothy Lannones with all of the fun (the sex, the fetishism, the florid imaginings) drained out.

That is not a criticism that one could even consider levying against Juwelia, whose show “Paintings” (January 8–February 7) was upstairs from Beauchene at Jack Hanley Gallery. This self-taught Berlin-based artist makes canvases that are so gloriously campy that you can imagine even Andy Warhol of the 1950s looking at them askance. Action-packed and elegantly painted, they feature towering wedding cakes, flutes of bubbly, handsome men, and huge bouquets of flowers. In one painting, a tuxedoed gent kisses the stockinged foot of a lady. Florine Stettheimer comes immediately to mind, but Stettheimer’s scenes of bohemian life would look positively restrained next to these canvases. And we haven’t even gotten to all of the little paintings shaped like small dogs! Juwelia has said that the works present sincere fantasies—life as the artist would like to live it (and often does).

Setting aside Juwelia, today’s figurative painting owes a great deal to a newfound interest in previously sidelined figures—ludic-minded, hard-to-classify renegades of modernism and postwar art like Picabia and Stettheimer, Copley and Kogelnik, who eschewed clear intentions and meanings for action and entertainment, letting the pieces fall where they might, as well as purveyors of pure funk like Peter Saul and Robert Colescott. The late Italian Enrico Baj joins that canon, thanks to a revelatory survey at Luxembourg & Dayan (November 5–January 30), which showed him playing as fast and loose with signs as, say, Juliano-Villani.

In his “Modifications” series from 1959 and 1960, Baj painted rough-hewn Dubuffet-like monsters on thrift-store-bought canvases, many featuring nude women. And in *The Double Grande Jatte* (1971), he presented a loopy version of Seurat’s masterpiece—trippy patterns and smiling cartoon heads made with bits of fabric—that might as well have been informed by digital processes.

A figure from the more recent past, Raymond Pettibon, shambled back into view for a collaborative show with Marcel Dzama at David Zwirner called “Forgetting the Hand” (January 14–February 20). Though Pettibon has had no problem looking good in recent appearances at Zwirner and at Independent New York (with Zwirner)—he now seems fully at ease letting it rip in color (no small thing)—Dzama’s charm, at least to my eye, has dissipated over the years, growing increasingly repetitious, cutesy, and cloying: an endless series of milquetoast cartoons, a poor man’s Henry Darger. But Pettibon, thankfully, seemed to have delivered a much-needed shock to Dzama’s system.

Drawings that the two worked on together buzzed with manic activity, Pettibon’s texts lending Dzama’s occasionally too- quaint tendencies a welcome mordancy. Dzama’s masked ladies and Pettibon favorites like Batman and Robin were everywhere, getting into all sorts of trouble. In one team effort, two conservatively dressed Dzama women gasp in horror before one of Pettibon’s trademark black phalluses, shown emerging from a wall. Above it, a sign reads, “If this handle is pulled, the world will come to an end.” In another, hands place a cloth over the mouth of a wide-eyed woman, right below this text: “Most men fear getting laughed at, while most women fear rape and death.” Collaborative wall drawings were instant classics, particularly a Dzama figure on a surfboard, riding one of Pettibon’s famous waves.

The solo exhibition “Fear of Waves” at Canada (January 9–February 14) showed another veteran painter, Katherine Bradford, in fine form with hazy, warm paintings populated by rosy- and orange-skinned figures. In some works, these personages swim or surf through brushy color fields (in one they seem to be hot-tubbing in outer space). In my favorite, a whole group of swimmers leap for dry land ahead of an incoming breaker, a wave of abstraction foaming white.