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### A BOUQUET OF GROUP ART SHOWS NEAR HOUSTON STREET

by Roberta Smith



“Last to Leave” (2020), by Reggie Burrows Hodges, combines oil and pastel on linen.

These expansive exhibitions, in galleries on or near the Lower East Side, create an immersive sense of art and the reawakening art scene.

Nothing says welcome back to the art world like a gallery group show. Consider it a choral, rather than solo, performance that speaks of the diversity and durability of art, an affirmation that is especially needed after months of inactivity, isolation and uncertainty. Not that any of that is over.

Nonetheless, these types of exhibitions allow us to catch up, to cover extra ground and to appreciate the persistence, against all odds, of art galleries that are less than global in their reach. They can be focused or broad; can touch on particular themes or histories. And group shows are also self-portraits, snapshots of the gallery’s sensibility and purpose. Right now four exhibitions on or near the Lower East Side, while also available online, especially reward in-person visits.

#### **‘(Nothing but) Flowers’**

Through Sept. 13 at Karma, 172 & 188 East Second Street; [karmakarma.org](http://karmakarma.org).

The most sizable and impressive of these four group shows is “(Nothing but) Flowers” at Karma, an East Village gallery with two spaces — one quite large, one small, both immaculate. Each location is overflowing with paintings and works on paper that feature various blooms or suggestions of same, either centrally or as part of larger compositions, whether interiors, portraits or landscapes, or even abstract. They are the work of nearly 60 artists — most but not all still with us — more than half represented by two or more works. With such numbers the show pays homage

to one of art's most modest yet enduring subjects and to the energy and joy ultimately at the core of all soul-sustaining creations.

Part of the impact comes from the way the selections are generously mixed and matched through several generations. They extend from the likes of Jane Freilicher, Nell Blaine, Lois Dodd and Alex Katz — whose attention to various forms of plant life began in the 1950s, when they were swimming against the current of Abstract Expressionism — to a host of emerging or little-known artists.

The less-familiar names have their own generational spread, from the great multitalented modernist Zenzaburo Kojima (1893-1962), who in this instance looks like the Henri Rousseau of Japan, to Andrew Cranston, a Scottish painter with a wonderful Vuillardian touch who has just turned 51, and the Paris-based Henni Alftan (born in Finland in 1979), who brings a flat, crisp formalism to the subject at hand. The midcareer artists include Amy Sillman, who has taken up a painterly realism (on paper) for floral subjects, and Tabboo!, who floats flowers in vases or pots on fields of plain linen, as well as Jonas Wood, Nicole Eisenman and Ida Ekblad.

A tremendous vitality emanates from the ranks of emerging artists, some of whom have not yet had solo shows in New York. In "Last to Leave," Reggie Burrows Hodges combines oil and pastel on linen and poignantly evokes the commemorative symbolism of flowers with a shrouded image of a young man holding a lavish bouquet. Soumya Netrabile paints a pulpy dark red form that is nearly abstract and titled "The Waning of the Powerful."

Woody De Othello translates the tragicomic exaggerations of his emotionally charged ceramics into "Space for Growth," an oil on paper that to my eye at least finds common ground between David Hockney and Elizabeth Murray. And Max Jansons borrows from the decorative vocabulary of peasant art to comment slyly on modernist abstraction. Other works to look out for are by Samuel Hindolo, Jeanette Mundt, Jennifer Packer, Uman and Ernst Yohji Jaeger.

"(Nothing but) Flowers," which was organized by Brendan Dugan, Karma's proprietor, with lots of input from across the art world, is actually quite profound, inspiring in its inclusiveness and liberating in its pleasures. Its message is simple but deep: Artists must do what they must do — which means anything and nothing else. In all, this show is an excellent template for a Whitney Biennial.

### **'Dark Was the Night'**

Through Sept. 6 at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, 208 Forsyth Street; shfap.com.

Nearby, in the northern regions of the Lower East Side (near Houston Street), and to the other extreme in terms of size and finish is "Dark Was the Night," at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects. The title, seemingly cued to the current national, nay, the global, mood, is from the gospel blues song "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground," written by Blind Willie Johnson, who, in the 1927 recording, has an eloquent way with slide guitar and wordless humming.

You don't always know what to expect in this diminutive somewhat funky shop of a gallery, except that it will probably be some distance from the blue-chip and the slick. The show wends from the small front space to the smaller back office, past

the desk, above the flat files and a small sink (presently overseen by a wonderful little night sky painted by Susanna Coffey) and back to the desk again. Among the better-known artists, represented by mostly modest works, are Arshile Gorky, John D. Graham, Tony Smith and Jack Goldstein, whose “Untitled (lava trails)” presents a field of black rived by scorching orange trails of lava. It pictures catastrophe while punning on abstraction.

But the lesser-known works tend to carry the day, including June Leaf’s storm-tossed “Woman and Infant in Lifeboat” (1995), one of her best paintings — as is Paul Resika’s “Fallen Angel” (1997-99), which conjures Icarus’s plunge. Jan Müller’s “The Great Hanging Piece” (1957) is a totem of eight small canvases that picture various demonic faces and tableaux. The show’s newest name belongs to Stipan Tadic — a transplanted Croatian and recent graduate of Columbia University’s M.F.A. program. His “Medika Dance” (2019) evokes a dark alley leading to a late-night club, an image out of German Expressionism by way of Underground comics; it depicts an alternative cultural center in Zagreb and is based on Pieter Bruegel’s “Peasant Dance.”

In contrast, E.M. Saniga’s evocative “A Dancing Pointer” (2005-6) can be seen to depict a bit of deserted frontier at dusk where a man playing a guitar coaxes a hunting dog onto its hind legs — a bit of quiet before the storm of progress. Balancing out the paintings are photographic works — each adding its own unsettling note — by Zoe Leonard, David Wojnarowicz and Richard Morrison.

### **‘Old Friends, Part 2’**

Through Sept. 13 at Tibor de Nagy, 11 Rivington Street; [tibordenagy.com](http://tibordenagy.com).

This cheerier companion to the Steven Harvey show, in size and focus, fills Tibor de Nagy, a relative newcomer to the Lower East Side — having relocated in 2017 after spending 67 years on 57th Street where it gave early shows to Freilicher, Carl Andre and Helen Frankenthaler. “Old Friends, Part 2” presents 12 paintings by mostly younger artists, although the British-born Trevor Winkfield, now 76, weighs in with a stylized portrait of the poet John Ashbery as a kind of heraldic hood ornament. It harks back to the gallery’s early days, when its denizens were especially close to the New York School poets.

There are eccentric, high-angled interior views by Ann Toebbe and Sarah McEneaney; exquisite still lifes by Susan Jane Walp (who is also in the Karma show), Richard Baker and Jen Mazza; quasi-abstractions by Medrie MacPhee and Hildur Asgeirsdottir Jonsson; as well as an exceptional nocturnal seascape by Jesse Murry that could be in the Harvey show. This grouping celebrates art on a domestic scale, as something to live with, and learn from, on a daily basis.

### **‘An Alternative Canon: Art Dealers Collecting Outsider Art’**

Through Sept. 19 at Andrew Edlin Gallery, 212 Bowery; [edlingallery.com](http://edlingallery.com).

Like Karma’s flower show, “An Alternative Canon” is an expansive, densely-installed blowout, although more rambunctious in its diversity and sometimes rough-edged objects, most notably two gaudy, garrulous collie-size sculptures of a glammed-up lion and an elephant made by O.L. Samuels from the collection of Arne Anton.

The exhibition, which has been organized by the curator and critic Paul Laster,

reviews the historic, tumultuous and continuing expansion of contemporary art fomented by outsider art starting in the early 1970s — along with that era’s various liberation movements — and further stretches its elastic boundaries.

Is the photographer Weegee, who taught himself his trade and elevated it to art, an outsider? Is the poet and actor Taylor Mead, who once scrawled on a small black canvas the sentence, “I was born with a silver foot in my mouth”? And what about Jim Carrey, a genius as an actor, represented here by a cartoonish work on paper that portrays the president as a piece of toast?

Canonical artists abound here, among them Bill Traylor, Henry Darger, Adolf Wölfli, Grandma Moses and Minnie Evans (also in the Karma show). And, of course, a main attraction lies in seeing what art dealers, who rank high among the people who cannot live without art, keep for themselves. Their choices can be great, eccentric or, it seems, what they could afford or couldn’t sell. None of that is detailed here so you have to just look and form your own opinions.

Perhaps you’ll be drawn — as I was — to excellent work by unfamiliar names. This includes several pieces lent by Shari Cavin and Randall Morris of Chelsea’s Cavin-Morris Gallery, among them a tapestry-like stain-painted scene of mythological animals by Leonard Daley from 1998; a small drawing of a pile of words and neon details by Zdenek Kosek (1991); and a sedimentary array of scrolling lines by Joseph Lambert (2014). Also of interest, a hallucinogenic landscape painting by Elisabetta Zangrandi, and a painting of a slightly squishy female nude by Vera Girivi from the dealer James Barron. Overall, these efforts leave no doubt that art of quality is always being made somewhere, by someone, and that there are, inevitably people seeking it out.