

KAREN WILKIN

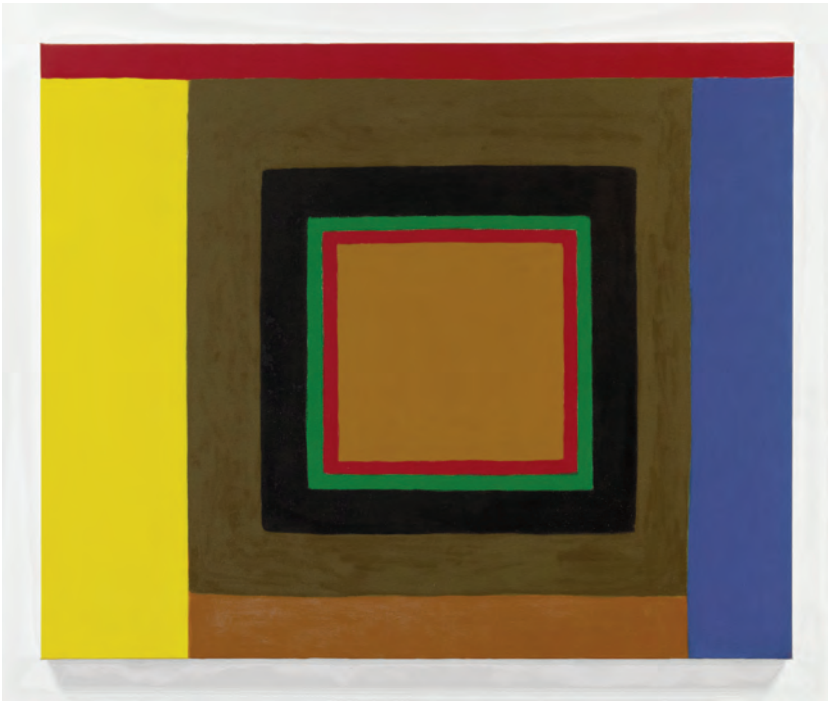
At the Galleries

IMPRESSIVE EXHIBITIONS BY WOMEN WERE CONSPICUOUS this past season, ranging from intimate records of close observation to explorations of not-quite Euclidian geometry, from playfully updated history paintings to an elegiac, multi-screen video installation, and an improvisation on a celebrated Old Master prototype. There were memorable shows by male artists, as well, although in today's climate, it may be dangerous to say so. A distinguished curator at a major museum lost his job a few years ago when he stated the presumably neutral fact that the institution was not going to stop collecting the work of white males.

But about the women: the title of Harriet Korman's "Portraits of Squares," at Thomas Erben Gallery in Chelsea, was as deceptive as the works themselves. Rather than precisely geometric, crisply symmetrical paintings, as we might have expected, we discovered personable, rectangular canvases that rang changes on surprising arrangements of slightly off-kilter squares. Korman has explored the possibilities of grids for some time, but she has always allowed irregularities of free-hand drawing to enrich her work. "Portraits of Squares" was no exception. Surrounded by bands of varying width or by wedges, sometimes outlined with a sure but not infallible hand, the eponymous squares could be more or less centered on the modestly sized rectangular canvases, but often drifted to the sides, creating lively imbalances. The squares changed sizes and, on occasion, were subdivided into facets that momentarily suggested three dimensions. Each painting was structured differently, now minimally subdivided, now with multiple components, consistently disrupting our expectations.

Korman is a remarkable colorist who orchestrates complex relationships of unnamable hues. "Portraits of Squares" was dominated by warm, saturated, often earthy colors, offset by intense blues, yellow, and an unexpected pink. Perhaps because of the prevalent ochres, off browns, and tawny intermediaries, the palette had Renaissance overtones—not the chalky chroma of frescos, but the lush hues of Venetian aristocrats' costumes. The longer we spent with Korman's seemingly straightforward, restrained, geometric paintings, the more complex they became. Rather than being the easily understood presentations of familiar geometry suggested by "Portraits of Squares," they offered a lot to look at and think about. Korman has said that she had wanted to make these paintings for decades. How fortunate that she finally did.

At one of Miles McEnery's multiple Chelsea spaces, Emily Mason's



Harriet Korman, *Untitled*, 2022. Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York.

“The Thunder Hurried Slow” presented paintings mainly from the late 1970s, with a few from the late 1960s and early 1970s. (The title comes from an Emily Dickinson poem.) In 1965, Mason (1932–2019) and her painter husband Wolf Kahn had moved back to New York, after almost a decade in Europe, and a few years later purchased the Vermont farm where they would spend summers for the rest of their long working lives. Given when they were made, it’s not an overstatement to say that the works in the recent show seemed to reflect Mason’s deep experience of Italy and Italian art, as well as her growing familiarity with the light and landscape of New England. Noteworthy for their ample scale and radiant color, and built, for the most part, with economical, layered, transparent sweeps, the paintings on view gave us Mason at her best. *Hear the Wind Blow* (1972) and *And the Sea Beyond* (1972) played bright, soft-edged rectangles against glowing yellow fields to hint simultaneously at dazzling light and man-made structures, before engaging us simply as *painting*. Similarly, *Greener Lean* (1978) and *Powder Blue* (1979), both named for their dominant hues, claimed and held our attention with their contrasts of paint applications, from responsive and runny to assertive to almost unseeably transparent, at the same time that the fresh spring palette of the former triggered associations with the natural world, and the pale hues of the latter recalled bleached skies

and Italian frescos. It was good to see Mason painting with such confidence and authority.

A few blocks away, Paula Cooper Gallery showed “Beatrice Caracciolo: The Parable of the Blind,” works made in 2023 by the Paris-based, Italian-born artist. Caracciolo has often used, in completely non-literal ways, existing images, including documentary photographs that have moved her deeply, as starting points for muscular, calligraphic works. This time, she departed from Pieter Brueghel the Elder’s *The Blind Leading the Blind* (1568, Museo del Capodimonte, Naples), with its cascade of beggars about to fall into a ditch, a work she has known lifelong. Once an admonitory parable, Brueghel’s painting now seems an apt metaphor for our troubled times. Caracciolo dissected Brueghel’s composition, transforming its rhythms into expressive, freewheeling charcoal drawing. The original composition was most visible in a large charcoal and pastel near-transcription in which the figures and their landscape setting were translated into planes of dense, energetic strokes, with the heads of the blind protagonists turned into blank zones of white strokes. A series of oversize heads exploded Brueghel’s conception into eloquently modulated, rapid lines. A study of the painting’s tree became an exuberant, independent configuration.

The Blind (Triptych)—three panels, each about five by six feet—stripped down Brueghel’s painting into robust, fragmented gestures and collaged patches of delicate tones, almost independent of the source. Yet the memory of the off-balance bodies that provoked the image persisted, as if Brueghel’s beggars haunted Caracciolo’s panels. Each work in “The Parable of the Blind” rewarded extended attention, but I kept going back to *The Blind (Triptych)*, perhaps because it seemed both to sum up what Caracciolo had extracted from the Brueghel and transubstantiate it into a new, ravishingly drawn image that engaged us entirely for its own abundant merits.

A male presence in Chelsea, “Thomas Nozkowski: Everything in the World,” at Pace Gallery, allowed us to watch this extraordinary, influential painter becoming himself, through a selection of works from the 1970s and 1980s. Most were the 16” x 20” format that Nozkowski (1944–2019) adopted as a protest against his generation’s predilection for extremely large canvases, but four rarely seen larger works from the 1980s, one six feet across, punctuated the show. The enigmatic configurations that Nozkowski is known for were already there: floating shapes and unnamable events that, as he taught us to expect from him, seemed at once very specific and unfathomable. Also present was his unpredictable orchestration of color—dusky reds, appetizing pinks, acidic yellows, luminous blues—combined in ways both surprising and inevitable. The paintings of the 1970s were constructed with broad, dry, brushy strokes that made the action of Nozkowski’s hand very visible, announcing themselves as constructions of painting incidents nearly coalesced into mysterious shapes, anticipating the artist’s later, better-known work. The expressively modulated surfaces and dragged gestures

of these early works would become patterns and warped grids, and clearly delineated shapes, but the mood and emotional temperature of Nozkowski's later work were already present.

We've learned that the resonance of his unidentifiable imagery is the result of its being distilled from particular experiences, as diverse as a hike in the woods, reading an abstruse text, or watching a movie, along with countless other stimuli, both visual and non-visual. It was fascinating to see the increasing clarification of Nozkowski's distinctive language during the years covered by the exhibition. The paintings of the 1980s, including the four unexpectedly large ones, generally depended upon more solidly defined accumulations of ambiguous, mostly organic shapes than those of the 1970s, with interlocking configurations often clustered in the center of the canvas, somehow making the "background" as important as the puzzling "protagonists" in the wordless dramas. A few of the wonderful early works in "Everything in the World" suggested that Nozkowski might have become a different kind of painter than the one we know and admire—one more dependent on the materiality of paint, for example—while others suggested a single-minded path to his eloquent later work. Both provided welcome insight into the evolution of a wonderful artist.

Downtown, we encountered yet another strong exhibition by a female painter. On the Lower East Side, Half Gallery showed "Truth Be Told," recent works by Kyle Staver, with large paintings installed in the main space, supplemented by small ones in the nearby annex. The rollicking large canvases continued and expanded Staver's updated versions of history painting. In the past, she has tackled biblical subjects and myths, reinvigorating familiar stories with a wry, feminist point of view and presenting them with brash, fluid imagery and vibrant color. Now, without abandoning the classical past—Amazons played important roles in her recent paintings—Staver is revisiting fairy tales and, it seems, inventing her own antic narratives. A prince embraced Sleeping Beauty as she reclined on a bower of roses, while his horse, tied to a tree, occupied the background and bluebirds fluttered in the foreground. We recognized the tale, but our attention was held by Staver's jaunty drawing, the lively contrast of the wedge of Beauty's hot pink skirt against the textured celadon of the prince's angular silhouette, and the insistent rhythm of the scrawled roses. Elsewhere, a small Goldilocks was almost engulfed by personable bears, the gorgeous browns of their vigorously stroked fur setting off the luminous figure discovered in bed. Again, the orchestration of textures, color, and dramatic light animated the deliberately compressed composition. Amazons shot arrows as they rode spirited horses and sometimes were shot themselves. Horses' nostrils flared. Arachne was tangled in spiders and a web.

We could enjoy Staver's inventive imagery, her lively animals and sea creatures, and busy human characters, at the same time that we delighted in her full-bodied hues and often theatrical lighting effects, but our recognizing her well-known stories added a stimulating tension

to our response. We were forced to reconcile bold, accomplished compositions, intensely serious in their ambition to belong to the history of narrative art, with subject matter that we sometimes associate with childhood, always presented with wit and humor, intense color, and engaging paint handling. The combination was irresistible, whether we encountered it in the large canvases or in the small, looser versions. Both groups dealt with similar images, but the small works are not studies for the large ones; instead, like the relief sculptures that Staver showed in her last exhibition, the various versions evolve in tandem, with the smaller works used to explore possible variations or alternatives. While Half Gallery's narrow annex space worked well for the small paintings, it would have been instructive to see some of them beside the large versions—not that I wasn't delighted to see both groups separately.

Cristin Tierney, on the Bowery, presented Mary Lucier's nine channel video and sound installation "Leaving Earth." Inspired by the journal kept by her late husband, the painter and writer Robert Berling, after his diagnosis with a terminal illness, the work combines video and still images of the couple's living and working environments, offering glimpses of their Chelsea and rural New York State homes and studios, and their surroundings. Both a deeply moving meditation on mortality and an affirmation of continuity, rebirth, and the persistence of memory, the piece explores Lucier's experience of the end of Berling's life, as well as his response to his situation, best described as a detached curiosity about the impending transformation. The largest screen was a kind of introduction, with images of Berling's sunlit studio and quotations from the journal: "being about to pass through an unknowable membrane into the unknown" and "Spirit and body contemplate separation and yet I forget to fear death." We saw a pot of beautifully cleaned brushes and close-ups of verdant paintings, one digitally melting into liquid paint. The artist's face filled the screen, nearly dissolved into pointillist touches—actually "snow" from obsolete video—and then disappeared. We heard cawing crows and chirping birds, a chain saw and heavy machinery, a plaintive saxophone, and more.

On the opposite side of the room, six monitors displayed loops of images in indeterminate sequences: family photos of both Lucier and Berling, their friends and relations; a collapsing house; a fallen carousel horse; baby swallows fed by their mother; the shudders of a dying fawn; a rushing stream; construction machinery; rubble; fires at Ground Zero; hands drawing massive logs. The rectangular screens, elevated on slim supports, evoked an installation of landscape paintings, while remaining declaratively about their wholly contemporary medium. A near-horizontal monitor offered images mainly of water, evoking a pond whose depths and reflections Berling often painted, while a wall-mounted component captured the changing light and atmosphere of changing seasons. Excerpts from the journal were interleaved unpredictably: "my mind is now that of a child for whom time does not yet exist"; "moving with as little distraction as possible toward the light";



Kyle Staver, “Truth Be Told,” installation view. Courtesy of Half Gallery. Photo by Jake Holler.

“finding myself on the edge of consciousness, the lights go out like that.” Lucier’s face filled the highest monitor, her expression neutral and inscrutable. At times her image and the pointillist image of Berlind confronted each other.

“Leaving Earth”—a phrase from the journal—demanded that we spend time, sometimes concentrating on one sequence, sometimes skipping from one to another, allowing the gradual accumulation of images, sounds, and the occasional phrase from the journal to present a message of loss, resignation, and hope. As Lucier put it “words, pictures, and sound become interchangeable, not serving as descriptions, but as a rumination on reality and a form of coping.” Or as Berlind described his state of mind: “a succession of discontinuous moments occur then disappear without the elemental structure of sequence.” If we could wrench our attention away from the mesmerizing images, an enigmatic mask-like object, *Last Breath* (2018), constructed with found objects including a burnt-out obsolete television tube, solemnly watched from the sidelines. It was like a hi-tech version of a classical herm or a funerary portrait, or perhaps, given Lucier’s distinguished history as a video pioneer, a spirit of place.

Heading back uptown, on Great Jones Street, “Seth Becker: A Boy’s Head,” at Venus Over Manhattan, gave us a selection of this gifted young artist’s recent disquieting paintings. At first encounter, they seemed to be intimate comments on perception. Landscapes, animals, and figures populated small panels notable for brushy paint-handling and economically rendered images. But we soon realized that nothing was quite what it seemed. A winged dog flew against dramatic, moonlit clouds. A tiger stared from an apartment window. A nude based on a



Lois Dodd, *Barn Window Closed*, 2019. Oil on Masonite. 8 x 10 inches. Copyright © Lois Dodd, courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.

celebrated painting by Jean-Antoine Watteau reclined above a partly opened grave, with a black dog reaching over her back. A dog studied his shadow on a white sheet. A man in a fancy green jacket worked at an ancient typewriter, watched by a fox—alive? stuffed?—their shadows looming. Bats swirled. A whale demolished a dory. A woman and a fish contemplated one another on the beach. Batman stood in a corner. Clearly, a great deal besides straight perception informed these seemingly unassuming paintings.

Becker, we learned, collects oddball vintage postcards, which can serve as sources and as triggers for invention, but it's evident that things seen, transformed by imagination, also provoke his images. The paintings are enlivened by a tug of war between seeming fidelity to experience and peculiarity, between, for example, acutely observed qualities of light and subject matter that becomes stranger and stranger, over time. Becker has long responded to the unexpected. Early, apparently straightforward views of his Brooklyn neighborhood often included the green parakeets that have improbably colonized the area. A few years ago, images with elusive animals and mysterious people, sometimes from unexpected points of view, hinted at the present series. I've followed Becker's work since he was an MFA candidate at the New York Studio School, so I feel confident in saying that "A Boy's Head" included his strongest, most poetic paintings to date.

Finally, Uptown, at Alexandre Gallery, Lois Dodd was celebrated in “Outside In: Recent Small Panels.” Dodd, who turns 97 this year, continues to paint what she describes as “seeing things,” responding to perception to extract the essence of the familiar, turning it into subtle touches of luminous color, and revealing the geometric order underlying even the most apparently random aspects of the world around us. There’s a much-reproduced photograph of Dodd, geared up to paint *en plein air*, with a sheltering hat, toting her paintbox and other, bulky necessities into the woods near her Maine home. The small works at Alexandre hadn’t required that kind of athleticism, but rather reported on things from the outdoors brought inside and viewed up close, held in the hand, or presented us with views familiar to the artist, sometimes seen through the window, at different times of day or in different seasons.

For all Dodd’s ability to suggest the specifics of particular places, times of day, or times of year, it’s her way of transforming her subject matter that keeps us looking at seemingly modest works such as those in “Outside In”—paintings so pared down to essentials that they verge on abstraction without losing any of their evocative specificity. In 2021, which she spent entirely in Maine, to avoid Covid, she explored the possibilities of whiteness in winter works such as *Blizzard Cushing*, with its diagonal slash of tree blurred by falling flakes or *Twin Arbor Vitae in Snow*, an encounter between a vertical bare trunk and an upright oval of evergreen foliage. She took a very different approach to the permutations of white, this time seen from a distance, in *Apple Tree in Bloom—May*, a radiant, pale explosion against fresh spring green, and in the ragged, confrontational shape of a fragment of *Birch Bark*, brought inside for study. Recent “portraits” of the jagged cones of different varieties of pine or the spheres of a sycamore seed pod and an Osage orange were quasi-abstractions, enriched by suggestive textures, their forthright singularity a contrast to fragile images of twigs, dried hydrangea flowers, and dried leaves. A view of outbuildings in Maine moved us back outdoors, while two delectable images of foliage framed by barn windows reminded us of Dodd’s fascination with seeing through, with reflections, and with spatial complexity. Elsewhere in the gallery, we could enjoy some of her small panels of chunky, unidealized nudes. Dodd’s lapidary vision sharpens our perceptions of our surroundings. I’ll never look at a piece of birch bark the same way again.