

ART & DESIGN

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

OCT. 27, 2016

Tschabalala Self

‘Gut Feelings’

Louis Fratino

‘With everyone’

Thierry Goldberg

103 Norfolk Street

Lower East Side

Through Nov. 13

In her latest works, Tschabalala Self continues to depict the regal black body — reposing, dancing, making love — to reverberating effect in large works of paint on canvas to which she appends found fabrics and smaller pieces of painted canvas. All are held together by sewing-machine stitching that creates swirls of energy and contributes to a marvelous random intricacy.

Ms. Self’s paintings convey an elaborate material culture of history and fantasy. Her curvaceous figures recall Thomas Hart Benton and German

Expressionism, while her patchwork surfaces evoke Romare Bearden and quilt-making. Inexpensive calico bloomers in one work conjure slave life; richer fabrics give the embracing couple in the show's first painting a foreign mien, as if they are a king and queen in Africa. Clichés about the black body as exotic, athletic and sexually powerful are turned to advantage, partly through the intense psychic connection between the figures. These beings are indifferent to the (white) gaze, even when they float on a field of eyes. Their backs are turned, their faces averted; moments of great intimacy are shielded by the layering of forms and shifts in scale, like the enormous, shielding vivid yellow hands in "Butterfly." Ms. Self's work has great promise, which she is developing.

In the Thierry Goldberg gallery's project space, the small jewel-like oil paintings of young Louis Fratino, seen in his New York solo debut, are well worth a look. Suffused with the glow of memory, they usually depict intimacy between young men, if not adolescents, who are seen dancing, sunbathing or at the barber shop. Mr. Fratino's main influence seems to be Dana Schutz, whose style he has compressed and miniaturized, distinguishing it with an extensive vocabulary of enlivening, lapidarian brushwork.

ROBERTA SMITH

Despina Stokou

'Shout'

Derek Eller Gallery

300 Broome Street

Lower East Side

Through Nov. 13

Despina Stokou leans heavily on dissonance. This Athens-born, Los Angeles-based painter's work often includes monochrome slashes and drips scuffling with waves of smeared or overlapping text. But in her fourth solo show for Derek Eller, she's adjusted these constituent elements into a stable (and less aggressive) balance, letting broad Abstract Expressionist gestures work in concert with painted and collaged words drawn from various sources.

On a series of smaller canvases that lead into the gallery's back room, this concert can be a little too smooth, offering pleasure without substance, like sugarless candy. But on four larger canvases that deal with art-world sexism, racism in entertainment and the dispiriting gabble of the presidential campaign, the artist hits with just the right force from just the right distance. Without overestimating the relevance or importance of her particular pulpit, Ms. Stokou simply depicts the noise as it is and lets us draw our own conclusions.

The 6-foot-by-7-foot “Jesse Williams BET Award Speech” — a white painter's take on an intensely pointed speech about the exploitation of black artists — is an especially neat trick. “Eric Garner,” written in tall white letters that lean back as if flinching, catches the eye first, followed by “Sandra Bland” in yellow to the right, a URL for a Time magazine item about the speech at bottom and “Black Lives Matter” up above. After that, the viewer experiences a strangely familiar tension between the pull of one more or less visible individual term and the desire, whether it's idealistic or cowardly, to find something clear and coherent in the whole.

WILL HEINRICH

‘Something Possible Everywhere’

‘Pier 34 NYC, 1983-84’

*205 Hudson Gallery
Hunter College Art Galleries
205 Hudson Street, TriBeCa
Through Nov. 20*

In the late 1970s, David Wojnarowicz found himself a capacious studio. The walls were crumbling, the floors rotting and the windows broken, and it had no electricity or running water. But it had harbor views, proximity to night life and few restrictions. It was the old Ward Line shipping terminal at Pier 34, atop the Holland Tunnel, and having been neglected by the city it was pretty much his for the taking. He invited friends like Mike Bidlo and Kiki Smith, who spread the word to others. By 1983 it had become a sprawling collective that attracted

an international coterie of artists and impresarios (and, inevitably, the police, who shut it down later that year).

The brief history of this dockside utopia is the subject of a rousing and evocative show at the Hunter College Art Galleries, one of several recent spotlights on the sometimes-illicit art and activities of the West Side piers in the 1970s and '80s. (Others include last spring's edition of MoMA PS1's "Greater New York" and, in 2012, "The Piers: Art and Sex Along the New York Waterfront" at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, jointly organized by the same painter and art historian, Jonathan Weinberg, who has put together "Something Possible Everywhere.")

As Mr. Weinberg emphasizes in his catalog essay, Pier 34 was a refuge from the commercial East Village gallery scene. There were shared interests in Neo-Expressionist figurative painting, but at the pier it typically wasn't happening on salable canvases; artists painted on the walls and windows, or made sculptures with whatever was at hand, or intervened in the site and structure some other way. (Wojnarowicz seeded the floors with grass and flowers.)

The pier was demolished in 1984, and not much of the art survives, although it was assiduously documented by Andreas Sterzing, whose photographs are scattered through the exhibition and collected in a transporting slide show. Where possible, surviving works and parallel pieces by the show's artists recreate original installations; David Finn's figures with scavenged-wood heads and trash-bag limbs, for example, sit on the staircase to the gallery's mezzanine as they did at the steps outside Pier 34.

With its optimistic title — a quotation from a 1983 statement by Wojnarowicz and Mr. Bidlo in *Benzene* magazine avowing that a Pier 34 could pop up in any abandoned building — "Something Possible Everywhere" is a call to action for New York's artists, an invitation to trespass and collaborate. But upon leaving the gallery and hearing the whir of nearby construction, you're likely to think: Maybe somewhere, but probably not here.

KAREN ROSENBERG

Sissel Blystad

‘Glennie’

Hester

55-59 Chrystie Street, Suite 203

Lower East Side

Through Nov. 13

Sissel Blystad is hardly unknown in her native Norway. She established herself in the 1970s as a weaver of large minimalist textiles, and one of her tapestries from 2005 hangs in the Norwegian National Parliament’s press room in Oslo. This is her first New York gallery show, however, and a departure for Ms. Blystad.

The works in “Glennie” at Hester (the title means “Glade” in English) are not woven. Rather, they are made with pieces of hand-dyed wool laid down on a shaped support. Unfortunate circumstances led Ms. Blystad to this method — a 2010 car accident left her with two broken arms, which prevented her from using her loom. Vibrant and complex, the geometric compositions draw on her long career as a weaver and on her drawings, but they also resemble paintings by early-20th-century artists like Sonia Delaunay.

Larger works here were created with the same technique, but with individual pieces of dyed wool laid over textiles with pre-existing patterns. One of these, “Glennie” (2012), hangs from the ceiling in the center of the room. You can see the muted pattern on back of the found textile, and how Ms. Blystad created a counterpoint to this with her own composition on the other side.

The counterpoint idea can be drawn out further. It is unusual to discover an artist like Ms. Blystad — clearly a master — tucked away in a second-floor gallery in Chinatown, where you expect to see young upstart artists. And yet, weaving and textiles are still treated as marginal or emerging practices in this country. This creates an interesting frisson within an exhibition that is both masterly and radical, traditional in feel yet subversive.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

