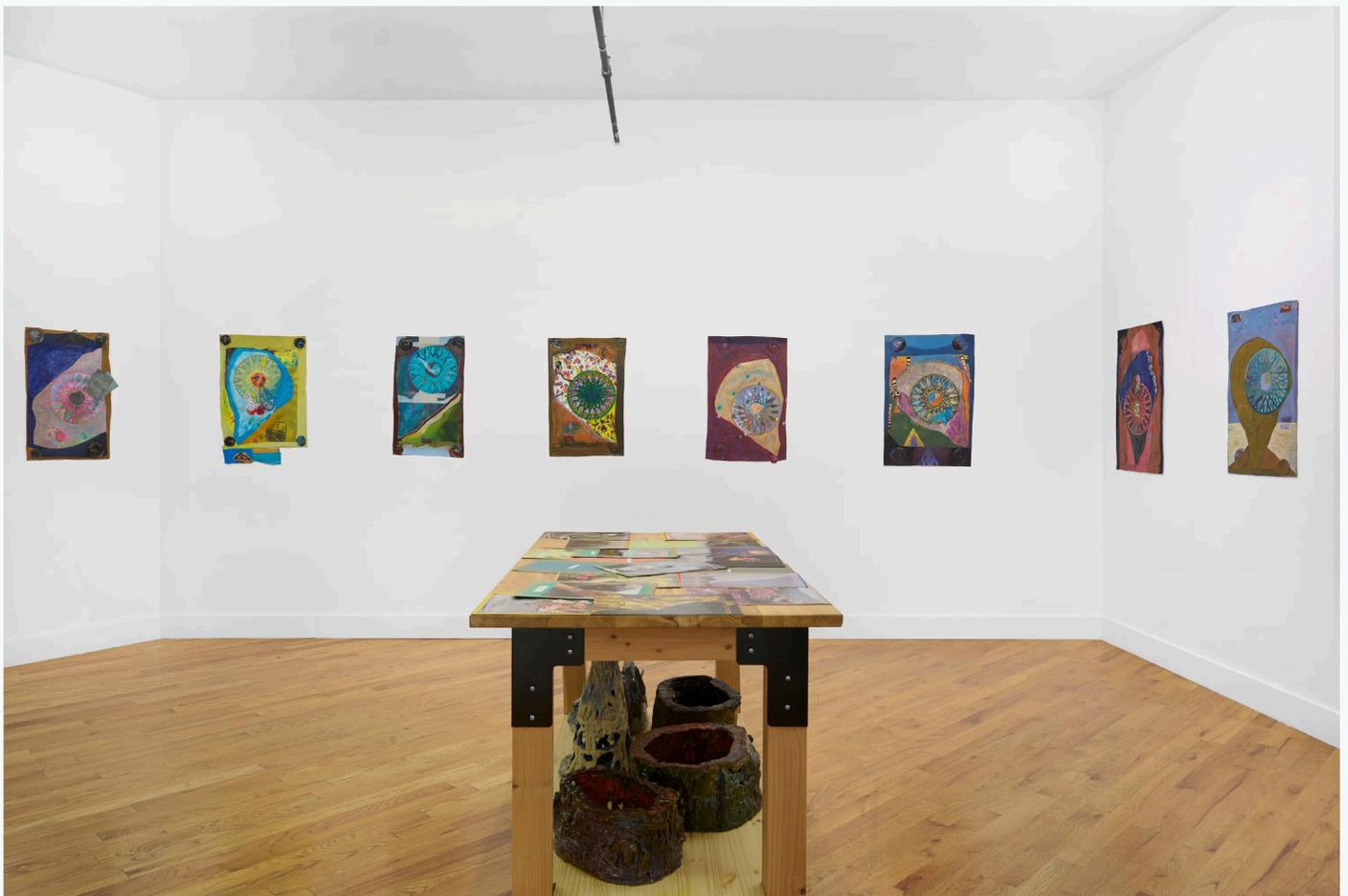


ARTSEEN | NOVEMBER 2024

## Ada Friedman and Helen Adam: *Ballads*

By Elizabeth Buhe



Installation view: *Ada Friedman and Helen Adam: Ballads*, David Peter Francis Gallery, New York, 2024.  
Courtesy David Peter Francis Gallery.

A trumpeting angel soars through the center of a wheel in Ada Friedman’s *Performance Proposal, Helen Rides VII: Wing and Wheel 3* (2020–24), a painting about the size of a concert poster. The implied movement of the winged creature emerging from the wheel suggests a separate spatial plane behind, which Friedman denotes with an uneven field of blue acrylic. Each of the twelve “Wing and Wheel” paintings on view (one for each month) is

roughly uniform in its iconography and composition, with a many-spoked wheel set atop what looks like the upper half of a butterfly wing. Although it is easy to imagine each wheel's bore as a portal to another world behind, the more I considered the thirteen paintings and five ceramic sculptures that Friedman is currently showing at David Peter Francis, the clearer it became that this work is not concerned with the modernist fixation on spatial construction as an end in itself. Instead, the artist's cage-like ceramic cathedrals, half-buried words scrawled at tilted hilt, collaged elements, and accretions of paint, pastel, crayon, and gouache take aim at the thresholds between realms of existence and states of being. Ultimately, they propose that these thresholds are flexible, emphasizing valuable insights drawn from pre-industrial worldviews, vernacular belief systems, private magic, and seasonal rites. The works on view show Friedman's multi-dimensional "space" spilling into both tangible and intangible worlds, animating spectral presences and residual energies from the past.

As Friedman's titles indicate, the works are all "performance proposals" for plays or performances that the artist stages, and they act as sets or architecture (an open dress rehearsal of *The Blue Moth Choir Reunion Concert* will take place on November 16, after the time of writing). Look, for example, at the only painting in the show associated with a 2019 performance at All Saints Church in Manhattan, *Performance Proposal, Helen Rides V: All Saints 2* (2019–22). Tucked below what might be the folds of a skirt in the central figure comprised of three stacked triangles, the artist has written "what space (play space) could this be?", thereby positioning painting as part of an extended temporal and spatial arena. Because painting always records an artist's hand gestures in the act of making, the works physically manifest a complex temporality that simultaneously engages the past, the viewing present, and the future. In this way they are closer to ancient methods of transmitting culture, like storytelling and performance, in which knowledge is spread through auditory and kinesthetic phenomena that are repeated over time rather than (only) formalized through the singular and static object of painting. The works repudiate preciousness, reading instead like repositories of potential, as scores, or as near-obsessive permutations of sign systems for which there is no locatable original. In this vein, Friedman defines "rules" that must then be applied to each painting in the series that create formal challenges and turn the routines of painting into ritual: each "Wing and Wheel" painting must feature four tin can lids, contain a woodblock shape, and depict an object that sticks through the spokes of the wheel.



Installation view: *Ada Friedman and Helen Adam: Ballads*, David Peter Francis Gallery, New York, 2024.  
Courtesy David Peter Francis Gallery.

This show makes two significant proposals that fly in the face of commonly-held assumptions about artmaking. First, Friedman proposes that painting can act as a dynamic, living presence that is engaged in the present while carrying meaning that is not fixed at any one particular moment in time. The second proposal the show makes (not entirely distinct from the first) is to assert a reconfiguration of community through the dispersal of authorship, particularly among women creators. The present showing is actually a two-person exhibition featuring the work of Friedman and poet Helen Adam, whose collage *Benign Mage Divine Bear* (c. 1957–59)—perhaps made for the artist Jess (Jess Collins), whose name appears on a bowler hat on the diptych’s right side—features poetry and images of women eerily deformed or in various states of emotional distress. In the center of the gallery, moreover, Friedman has placed Adam’s *Collage Gift to Robert Hershon and Donna Brook* (1982) atop a rough-hewn table, with her own ceramic sculptures such as *Performance Proposal*, *Helen Rides V: Diamond Light Castle* (2019) on the lower shelf.



Installation view: *Ada Friedman and Helen Adam: Ballads*, David Peter Francis Gallery, New York, 2024.  
Courtesy David Peter Francis Gallery.

This is the Helen who “rides” in the titles of Friedman’s works, which she views as posthumous collaborations with the elder artist. The narrative of riding derives broadly from Adam’s 1979 short story *Riders to Blokula*, which reinterprets Swedish witch stories of the seventeenth century. In *Riders to Blokula*, hapless men fall one after the next for Darcia, a seductive witch with piercing blue eyes. Darcia, symbolized here by the blue butterfly that appears in Friedman’s ceramic *Performance Proposal, Helen Rides V: Moth Puppet 1 and 4* (both 2019), as well as Adam’s collage, must ride these husbands in the midnight hours to the island castle of Blokula, a force field of desire that only women can enter—but where they also risk bodily harm. This is how, as Adam writes, “Darcia is alive in two worlds.”

By deploying these narrative associations, Friedman releases her work to a temporal flux that likewise exceeds materiality and the earthly sphere. The images of the wing and the wheel that Friedman deploys as her own personal iconography across the paintings therefore denote not a single entity (such as “God,” for example), but the possibility of fluid translocation within *both* the realms of time and space, which we usually imagine as governed by familiar and immutable rules. Pulled from worldviews not fully tainted by the ideals of efficiency and truth that capitalism and science hold dear, in Friedman’s hands the

motif of the wing and the wheel endorse an ever-shifting and non-linear reality that values touch, the evanescent trace, and the unseen. While Friedman may draw our attention to this ambiguous realm of experience, the work on view positions her as its momentary steward rather than its creator or ruler, for this is a worldview that eschews domination or full comprehension, and it is maintained collectively by the women of folklore who wielded power as oracles, sages, and healers. This is, in fact, a time and space coextensive with our own, as the paintings themselves suggest through their spatial continuity with the wall. Unstretched and nailed directly to the gallery wall, each canvas's edges are rough-hewn, and cut with slight irregularities. They assert no allegiance to painting's objecthood, nor to its promise of illusion. Like the collaged can lid that slips off the lower edge of the painting *Performance Proposal, Helen Rides VII: Wing and Wheel 3* (2020–24), Friedman succeeds in creating a slippage—and insisting on a continuity—between worlds.

---

**Elizabeth Buhe** is a critic and art historian based in New York.