

# FAMILY STYLE

Art

## Painting Time

Ada Friedman marches into mysterious territories, guided by the words of the late poet Helen Adam.

*Words by Qingyuan Deng*

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Ada Friedman, *Performance Proposal, Helen Rides VII: Wing and Wheel 2*, 2020-2022. Image courtesy the artist and David Peter Francis.

Based between Brooklyn and Texas Hill Country, Ada Friedman marshals a layered practice. The painter and performance artist's work is defined by an aesthetic of appreciation for systems, all the while being propelled by its own wrestling with forces that derail such systematic thinking to novel directions and positions. Friedman knows that her painterly system, performative in both its well-defined discourse and loose order, requires constant updating and maintenance—and the state of affairs can never be understood in full clarity. She accepts the equivocal messiness of Q painting in all of its glory and beauty.

In "Ballads," now on view at David Peter Francis in New York through December 7, Friedman dives into the realm of cyclical, personal glimmers with an intensity that recalls historical feminist gestures of reintroducing passion and excess into the concealed narratives of painting. The show is a dialogue between the artist and the late Scottish poet Helen Adam, whose clumsily magical ballads inspired the Beat Generation. Friedman, a long-time reader of Adam's esoteric writing, has previously staged multiple iterations of theater productions inspired by the poet's metaphysically imaginative evocation of ghosts and spirits.



"Ballads" installation view." Image courtesy the artist and David Peter Francis.

The word "conversation" as a relation of exchange does not encompass all of the assuming, correction, and redirecting that Friedman singularly performs from the vantage point of Adam's spiritually charged and nostalgic poems, plays, ghost stories, and collages. Her approach is distinct from biography: Friedman is uninterested in reclaiming a lost or forgotten genealogy, a mythology in itself. Rather, the artist's 13 Q paintings on

view are full of indexes, icons, and symbols that return to the emotional quality of Adam's collages, two of which are on view. In Adam's *Collage Gift to Robert Hershon and Donna Brook*, 1982, an assembly of images is arranged on a spectrum between the still-life of memento mori and American imagination of Victorian domesticity. This visual composition is accompanied by ritualistic texts that simultaneously deviate from and inform the images, reverting them to their original dramatics, prior to the mediation of cutting, pasting, editing.

A majority of Friedman's 13 new works belong to her series "Performance Proposal, Helen Rides VII: Wing and Wheel," in which she considers the Gregorian calendar as a point of departure into other forms of temporalities, such as the Hellenistic time of Aion: a non-linear, paradoxical measurement ripe with perpetual negotiations between chance and imagination. In "Wing and Wheel," Friedman places a wheel (sometimes closer to an orb) that represents the mystical movements of time in the center of her compositions. Four tin can lids frame the corners of the canvas like minor notations of intervals.



Helen Adam, *Collage Gift to Robert Hershon and Donna Brook*, 1982. Image courtesy Elizabeth Hershon, Hanging Loose Press, and David Peter Francis.

Each "Wing and Wheel" painting takes the materiality of acrylic paint itself as a site of accumulation: The incremental buildup of paint collates rough-edged color patches, which in turn become the mystical aura of wings imbued with a relentless restlessness. The texture of pencil and crayon is similarly treated with durational care and consideration, pronounced into a landscape of zig-zag contours and free-flowing strokes sectioning off the work. Occasionally, photocopies of images that appear plucked out of Adam's archive are injected into the painting, with open-ended questions written next to them.

At times, recognizable figures or things emerge from these rather abstract meditations on

time. In *Wing and Wheel 3*, 2020-2024, an angel playing a horn flies out of the wheel toward the upper left, tracing an immaterial line of flight on the painterly terrain. *Wing and Wheel 4*, 2020-2022, weaves in decorative patterns that play out the reverberation of time whilst onlooking creatures congregate in lower right. The most figurative work out of the series is *Wing and Wheel 8*, 2020-2024, which sets an alien, or a god, with the face of time against an austere, creamy yellow desert-esque background dotted with impressions of buildings, paying homage to Italian metaphysical painting.



Ada Friedman, *Performance Proposal, Helen Rides VII: Wing and Wheel 3*, 2020-2024. Courtesy the artist and David Peter Francis.

Elsewhere is a colossal painting titled *Performance Proposal, Helen Rides V: All Saints 2*, 2019-2022, originally a prop in a play animated by Adam's ode to blue moths, which was first staged at All Saint Episcopal Church in Manhattan in 2019. What at first seems to be an hourglass or a tower appears to be only color or collage studies once the viewer zooms in. Here Friedman fearlessly pushes the artist's processual and archival concerns to radical ends. Informed by serendipity in the context of studio practice as a relational endeavor, the sprawling presentation is punctured and remade by deterioration and maintenance over time. Boundaries between macro and micro elements are rendered indistinguishable. The work is a diaristically condensed personal archive that stems from the artist's inclination to re-activate by diverse materials, militant use of amateurism, and

deployment of palettes and gestures typically found in folk and outsider art. The result does not discriminate between disciplines, geographies, and art histories, rather it deems speaking, seeing, and touching as interconnected ways of feeling.

At David Peter Francis, Adam's poetic rearrangement of time and geography become a fertile ground on which Friedman writes her own painterly epic. The painter, who generously allows for eruptions of free association in her works, still insists on encoded and stylized oppositions to painterly conventions—which then become part of her world. Gibberish gives language new meaning; the decentralized anchor of a painting assumes its new center; and a painting is ever instrumentalized by time's eternal renewal.

*"Ada Friedman/Helen Adam: Ballads" is on view until December 7, 2024 at David Peter Francis at 35 E Broadway #3F, New York, NY 10002.*