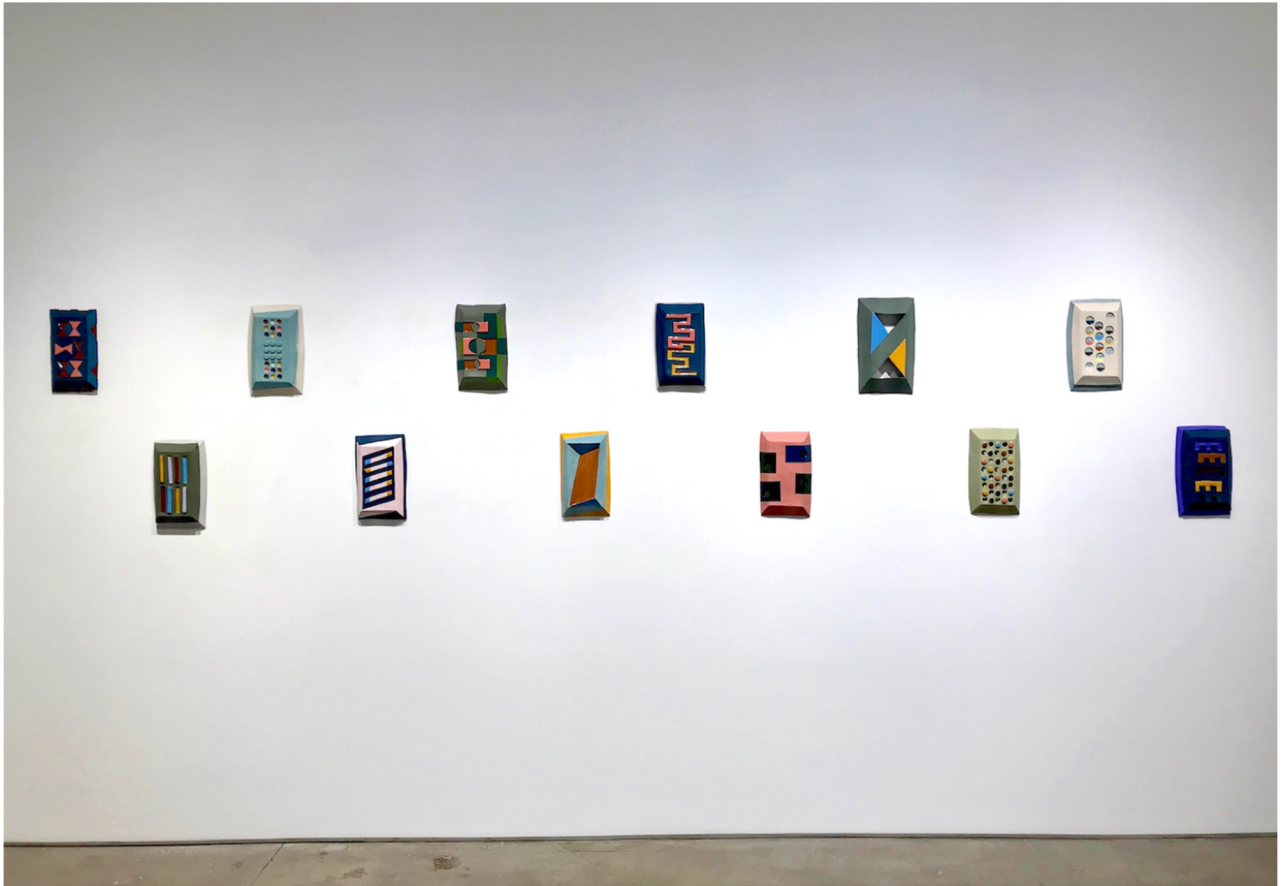


## The Pleasures of DIY Art

Is amusement now considered taboo?



John Yau 3 days ago



*Martha Clippinger: pieces at Elizabeth Harris Gallery, installation view (all images courtesy Elizabeth Harris Gallery)*

John Ashbery once told me that the reason why so many critics hated the New York School poets was because they suspected that they were having too much fun writing their poems. One must suffer for one's art. The problem is — what happened to pleasure? In the age of entrepreneurial fabrication and the latest wave of conceptual art, is it still possible to have pleasure while making DIY art? Or is any evidence of amusement now considered taboo?

Although Martha Clippinger and Elisa D'Arrigo work in very different

ways, the one thing they do share is the pleasure of making something out of disparate kinds of materials, and of evoking domesticity without cloaking it in theory.

That is not something to scoff at. This is why the pairing of their exhibitions, [\*Martha Clippinger: pieces\*](#) and [\*Elisa D'Arrigo: in the moment\*](#), at the Elizabeth Harris Gallery (March 30–May 11, 2019), with each in her own gallery space, seems so smart to me. The added bonus is that I had previously reviewed both artists and wanted to see what they had in store.

This is what I wrote about Clippinger's last show at this gallery in 2016:

Imagine the wayward progeny of the textile artist and printmaker Anni Albers and the Mexican geometric artist Gunther Gerzso, experimenting with the wild palette generated by a computer, and you get a glimpse into what Clippinger is up to. However, in contrast to most geometric abstractionists, she never goes for the big concept: her work is modest and playful, full of joyful, unapologetic insouciance. These works can bring a smile to your face, if you let them.

In addition to her painted wood constructions, put together from scraps, and her woolen tapestries, which she makes in collaboration with the Zapotec weaver, Licha Gonzalez Ruiz, Clippinger is showing two handmade quilts and a group of ceramic wall reliefs that she made in the summer of 2018, while in residence at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. The Kohler Arts Center is part of Kohler, the company known for its plumbing products. Each year, they select a number of artists to make work using their facilities.





Martha Clippinger, "tumbled dry" (2018), fabric, 57 x 40 inches

I like that Clippinger works across these different mediums, making modestly scaled pieces that could fit on the wall of a small apartment in Anywhere, USA. It seems to me that she — more than any other artist of her generation — has transformed the Bauhaus aesthetic of craft and fine art into something new and entirely her own. You would think that

Clippinger went to Black Mountain College when Ruth Azawa, M. C. Richard, and Anni Albers were there, but the school had already been closed for nearly three decades by the time she was born. And while it is easy to see her connection to Albers's interest in weaving, geometry, and use of repetition, Clippinger brings her own sense of composition, color and materials into play.

According to the checklist, the materials that Clippinger used in the 2018 quilt “tumble dry” (both artists use, for the most part, all-lowercase for their titles) included “machine-made and hand-quilted linen, beach towel, polyester, plaid curtain, striped synthetic, and cotton.” Clippinger does not use the quilt to comment on or parody painting — an avenue explored by other artists. The fact that “tumble dry” is made of natural and man-made materials that can be put in a washer and dryer — if the title is accurate — is a sign of her self-deprecating humor. If there is no barrier between art and life, then why shouldn't a piece made of fabric be able to be washed and dried?

I see the quilts as a logical extension of Clippinger's longtime use of scraps to make brightly painted wall reliefs, such as “puzzle” (2017), which is made of two layers of wood stacked on top of each other. The bottom layer is a rotated square, or diamond. It has been painted alternating bands of dark and pale yellow, which rise diagonally from the lower left side to the upper right. Over this painted diamond, Clippinger has attached and fitted together pieces of wood, most of them sporting a truncated circular section drilled out along one edge.





Martha Clippinger, "puzzle" (2017), acrylic on wood, 14 x 14 inches

The open portions of the truncated circles face outward. There is only one interior piece in which the circle is complete. Except for two red sections, each piece is painted a different color (turquoise, green, reddish brown, and brown, with one left unpainted). "puzzle" seems simultaneously deliberate and determined by chance.

The ceramic wall reliefs have beveled sides and are marked with shapes evoking bowties and tables or combs, along with circles, triangles, rectangles, bands of different widths, diamonds, and zigzags. In almost all of the reliefs, each of which employ a different palette, there are low-protruding forms and shallow recesses, a marriage of the quirky and rigorous.

Don't underestimate Clippinger's modesty — her openness to working in disparate materials, to utilizing a range of process, and to embracing the possibilities of collaboration bespeak a creative confidence and boldness. Clippinger doesn't take herself too seriously, but she is

always serious. She is playful and democratic in her work, which pulses with a domestic vibe that doesn't come wrapped in theory or any of the other safety nets that pass for critical thinking these days. She seems to have listened to Frank O'Hara and gone on her "nerve alone." That's welcome in so many ways.



"Elisa D'Arrigo: in the moment" at Elizabeth Harris Gallery, installation view

In 2013, while on a residency at the Civitella Ranieri Foundation in Umbria, Italy, D'Arrigo began working with clay, something that she had not done since 1981. In 2016, she showed a group of them at this gallery, which I [reviewed](#). While she continues to work with a tube or coil, which is a basic clay form, she also persists in pushing it in new directions.

For one, she often fires her pieces a number of times after adding more clay to the surface. The additions might resemble drops of wet sand or puckered skin. Other times the surface is smooth and mottled, reminding me of "end of day" or "spangle" glass, in which different bits of colored glass are fused into a single form. The tension between the surface and the form is one of the powerful aspects of D'Arrigo's work. In the future, she might consider furthering these possibilities into the piece's cavities.





Elisa D'Arrigo, "on a limb" (2018), glazed ceramic, 6 x 12 x 8.5 inches

In "on a limb" (2018), she has apparently joined three different tubular forms. We see a vase-like shape with rippling sides and two differently colored tubular forms extending from its shoulders, like sleeves, until they touch the pedestal.

The sleeves seem to keep the vase from falling over. There is an opening in the vase, which suggests that it has a purpose — to hold flowers or paint brushes, perhaps. The torso-like appearance of the central shape, with the two sleeve-like tubes becoming the support, give the whole thing a Frankenstein-like presence of a body put together from disparate parts.

As the title "googler 1" (2018) suggests, the surface of this black-and-white piece seems to be covered with googly eyes. The body of its open form is crumpled. Two stubby appendages animate the piece, making it look like a model for a headless torso in a comic horror film. Given their modest scale, the gamut of textures, colors, and shapes D'Arrigo attains while working with a hollow coil is commanding.





Elisa D'Arrigo, "P.G. on my mind" (2018), glazed ceramic, 5.5 x 11 x 5 inches

A group of five numbered works, which D'Arrigo has sequestered on a shelf, is titled "P.G. on my mind" (2017-18). The reference is to Philip Guston, specifically his satirical caricatures of Richard Nixon, in which he drew the 37th president as a phallus and his cheeks as drooping testicles. D'Arrigo's "P.G." sculptures resemble misshapen pipes with stems ranging from stubby to pitted and elongated.

Leaning over as they do, these works can be swollen or scrunched, ultimately becoming personifications of vulnerability, clumsiness, and inelegance – all the aspects of our body and behavior that call attention to our fallibilities. I think D'Arrigo's preternatural ability to invade that side of our consciousness — the one that is fearful of the gaze of others — imbues her pieces with their unaccountable presence.

Working in a modest scale with commonplace materials, while taking pleasure in the act of making, Clippinger and D'Arrigo find ways to pull us into the domain of emotion, which can be unsettling, embarrassing, and funny. I prefer that to the latest illustration of an institutionally approved theory.

Martha Clippinger: pieces and Elisa D'Arrigo: in the moment *continue at the Elizabeth Harris Gallery (529 West 20th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through May 11.*