

The Hudson Review

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— Diversion

ARTS REVIEW

At the Galleries

by
Karen Wilkin

For all of us who spent months longing, like unrequited lovers, to see “actual” works of art, their size, surfaces, and color unaltered by the homogenizing effect of the screen, the reanimation of New York museums and galleries in late August and September was nothing short of thrilling. Exhibitions that had closed within days of opening came back to life; others, seemingly postponed indefinitely, burst upon us with new dates. Reduced hours, fewer open days per week, the need for prearranged timed tickets or appointments, requirements for masks and social distancing while waiting to enter or while viewing, along with all other necessary precautions, seemed inconsequential compared with the pleasure of firsthand encounters with real objects of all kinds.

In March, the last New York art world event I attended was the opening of [Kyle Staver’s exhibition](#) at Zürcher Gallery—bold, large-scale, witty reimaginings of mythological and biblical themes, punctuated by the small reliefs the painter makes of her compositions to work out lighting effects. (Nicolas Poussin apparently did something similar.) The

unmasked gathering of artists, critics, collectors, friends, and the occasional curator was the usual convivial affair. The only sign of something out of the ordinary was the substitution of elbow bumps and other facetious forms of distanced greeting for embraces. Two days later everything locked down. By coincidence, six months later, when things began to open up, in September, the first opening I dared to attend—masked and distanced, like everyone else—was again at Zürcher Gallery. “11 Women of Spirit, Part 2,” originally scheduled for May, was an installment of “Salon Zürcher,” an ongoing series of group exhibitions, conceived as alternatives to New York’s rather overwrought art fairs. Selected by curator Stephanie Guyet, the show brought together works by Grace Bakst Wapner, Claudia Doring-Baez, Irene Gennaro, Christine Heindl, Elisa Jensen, Anki King, Ellen Kozak, Barbara Laube, Susan Mastrangelo, Claire McConaughy, and Holly Miller—artists of conspicuously different approaches, backgrounds, and ages.

The works ranged from Heindl’s quirky, fine-grained geometric abstractions to McConaughy’s dreamy landscapes, from Laube’s fields of aggressive texture to Bakst Wapner’s near-disembodied, fragile reinventions of the picture plane. A group of Doring-Baez’s small, densely painted images, based on Brassai photographs, made viewers invent their own narratives to link the ambiguous tableaux. Kozak’s shimmering, seductive accumulations of touches read as abstract distillations of her long-standing fascination with the way light is fractured, reflected, and diffused by the Hudson River, outside her Upstate studio. Jensen’s broadly brushed, barely indicated, silhouetted birds, part of a series called “liminal spaces,” seemed launched into the air by the subtly textured expanses of color surrounding them. Gennaro’s mysterious, burgeoning form, the only sculpture in the show, pulsed between quasi-Surrealist ambiguities and allusions to nature. If there was a unifying thread, it was the presence of the hand, manifest in a wide variety of ways: Miller’s patchwork assemblies of repurposed materials, Mastrangelo’s exuberant drawing with ropes and fabric, King’s loose, descriptive brushwork, and more. Obviously, Salon Zürcher provided only a narrow, if notably diverse slice through the current art world, but seeing, in actuality, a broad selection of serious, ambitious work, all of it by mature women, was an exciting way to return to looking at art after a long drought.