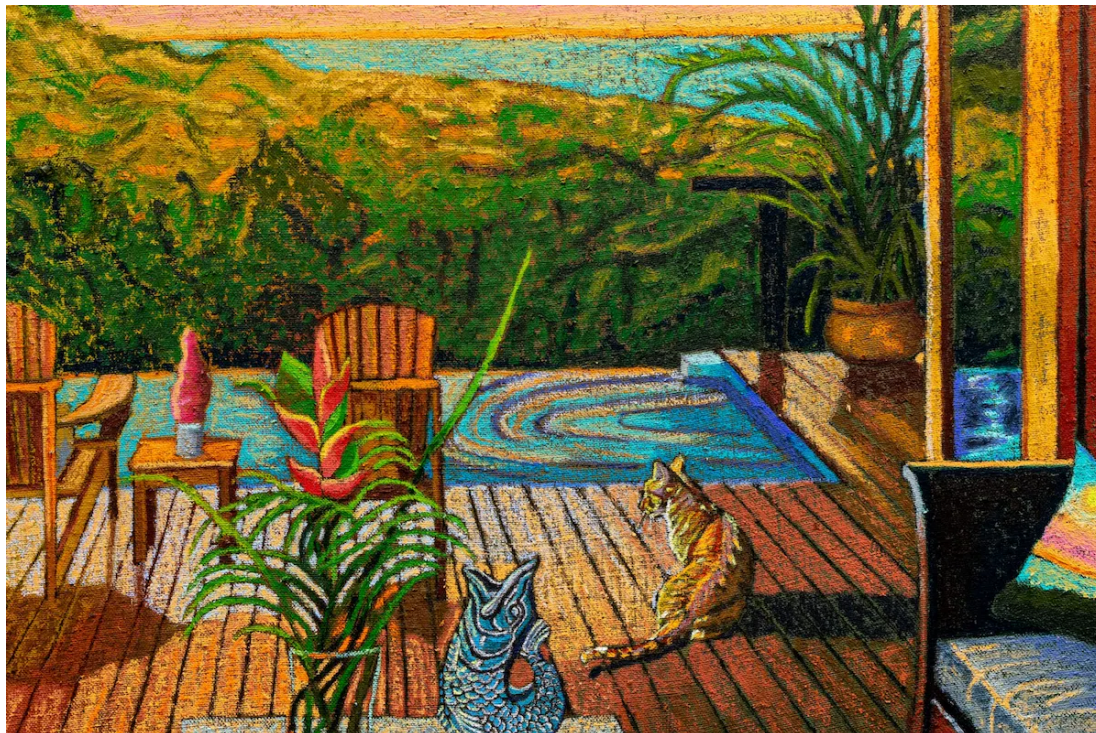


ARTS+

Optical Delight With a Punch

Balance, invention, and playfulness are on display alongside weightier content in summer exhibitions at East Hampton.



J.J. Manford, 'Wanderlust,' detail, 2023. Oil stick, oil pastel, and Flashe on burlap over canvas. Stefany Lazar, courtesy of J.J. Manford and Harper's East Hampton

ERIK DEN BREEJEN

Tuesday, July 11, 2023

12:54:25 pm



J.J. Manford

'The Golden Pheasant at Flamingo Estate & Other Tales of Wanderlust'

Eliot Greenwald

'Weller Known Facts'

Harper's East Hampton

87 Newtown Lane, East Hampton, NY

July 14 through August 16, 2023

J.J. Manford's new show at Harper's at East Hampton, one of the first galleries to open in a now-vibrant scene at the Hamptons, is a group of new paintings depicting interiors, for which he is known, as well as radiant views of the outdoors, as framed by man-made structures.

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"Threshold Painting," a seven-foot vertical canvas, draws us in — or out — to a landscape seen from within a room, encased by French doors and small windows filled with rich orange sunset light. A stoic cat establishes the foreground and looks out at the psychedelic scene. Perhaps the animal is a stand-in for the human figure, conspicuously absent from all the paintings, or an allusion to an alternate mode of perception. Bay Area painter [Joan Brown's](#) creature cameos, with their surreal humor, also come to mind.



J.J. Manford: 'Threshold Painting,' 2023. Stefany Lazar, courtesy of the artist and Harper's East Hampton

The contrast between the highly detailed potted houseplants and the fantastical, atmospheric countryside is striking, recalling elements of Milton Avery – but with higher chroma and more bravado – and Mark Rothko's ["Multiform"](#) paintings from the late 1940s. The perspective beckons us to cross the titular threshold and enter a zone where things are less tangible and known. Except for a patterned rug, the recreations of paintings and *objets d'art* that pepper the other works are absent, implying the possibility of transcendence

through material renunciation.

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Mr. Manford has developed a unique, eye-catching technique that manages to incorporate elements of [divisionism](#) and op art while largely eschewing the paintbrush. Coarsely textured burlap is initially covered with colored gradients of Flashe, a matte vinyl paint. The knotty, raised surface allows the artist to then scumble bars of oil paint atop, creating a dialogue between the two layers and an opportunity for optical mixtures of hues and shimmering effects.

In “Warhol’s Hamptons House with McCoy Snoopy Cookie Jar,” a kind of contextual hall-of-mirrors is created. The viewer, here in a Hamptons gallery, looks into a painting of the Hamptons home of Andy Warhol, an artist who blurred the lines between commerce and culture.

We witness the art and objects he valued, both real and imagined. His living quarters illustrate not the opulence of his collectors — a type of space seen elsewhere in the show — nor the radical nature of his art, but rather an understated and cozy Americana aesthetic. A cherished outsized Snoopy cookie jar stands as an analogy to the collecting of paintings, suggesting its absurdity, while a sleek office telephone in the foreground reminds us that business never goes on holiday.

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Throughout the exhibition, it's tempting to make comparisons to Henri Matisse, who famously said that painting should be like a comfortable armchair, providing relaxation and serenity. To him, the function of art was to create an escape from the horrors of the outside world, but Mr. Manford, with all the sensual pleasure his works induce, rejects escapism time and again by collapsing the illusion and reminding the viewer of the very thing they are looking at — art.

In the second gallery, Eliot Greenwald crosses the threshold and fully immerses the viewer into a world of wild imagery. By his own account a self-taught artist, his work has an almost relentlessly inventive quality. Each imaginary tree is painted with a different technique, sometimes wet-into-wet, alternately even and flat, with a wide range of calligraphic marks. Unconventional combinations of color are used throughout, yet still describe specific lighting conditions, even creating *trompe-l'œil* effects, while the organically shaped canvases are custom built by hand.

“Mahindra,” a large two-panel painting, shows the artist’s familiar “Night Car” motif pushed to a new level of abstraction. Like the lone lamppost covered in vines at the end of C.S. Lewis’s “The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe,” the car stands as a vestige of a previous reality, subsumed by a new one, barely recognizable as the thing it once was. Conversely, the car in “Scarlet Tanager” has headlamps that spew curved flames, harshly illuminating the nearby vegetation, like an invader in a foreign land. In all the paintings, twin crescent moons, painted in a range of alien hues, shine on a rich variety of intricately

textured, Seussical forms.



Eliot Greenwald: 'Scarlet Tanager,' 2023. Chris Mansour, courtesy the artist and Harper's East Hampton

Horror vacui, from the Latin for “fear of empty space,” is used in art criticism to describe a tendency of certain makers to fill every area of a picture with detail or decoration. Visionary artists [Martín Ramírez](#) and [Adolph Wölfli](#) employed this method to forge idiosyncratic lexicons of mark-making. It is in this tradition, as well as that of surrealist artists such as Max Ernst, who also pursued the unknown through unconventional techniques, that Mr. Greenwald resides, consistently finding surprising visual solutions to the problems he sets for himself.