

Jack Barrett

173 Henry Street
New York, NY 10002

Gallery Hours:
Wed-Sun: 12:00pm-6:00pm

Just Painting

curated by Ezra Tessler
June 21-August 3, 2019

Mequitta Ahuja, Mike Cloud, Christian Diaz, Louise Fishman,
Lee Lozano, Troy Michie, Anne Minich, Quentin Morris, Ruth
Root, Matthew Sepielli, Nancy Shaver, Henry Ossawa Tanner

There is a lot that painting cannot do. Yet this exhibition brings together paintings that aspire to *do something* even as they acknowledge their own limits.

The title “Just Painting” refers to the casual contingencies of a thing in the world, but also asks whether an object can have ethical qualities or aspirations. Can paintings be generous, selfish, humble, jealous, patient, greedy, or kind? How do they coexist with each other? What might they teach us about how to live together in the world?

For the artists in this exhibition, work and life—how they make, what they make, and how they live—are intimately connected. The *what* and *how* of the work is inherently linked to the *why*. On the surface, the works in these rooms are not marked by any particular taste or style: some are precise, others roughshod; a few are representational, many are abstract; most were made recently, though others are decades or over a century old. At stake, on the one hand, is the materiality of painting. On the other is the question of how to live.

Here, American identity is both a question and a statement. Some of these artists are expatriates, or formerly undocumented, or have worked in the same basement studio for five decades. In “Notes of a Native Son,” James Baldwin wrote, “I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that. So are we all.” The meaning of a work is linked to the life it comes from and the life embedded in it, but identity is not a skeleton key.

The artists in this exhibition are all models of integrity and grit. Their work reflects earnest searching, but also radical self-questioning—to paraphrase Barbara Kruger, they are full of wishful thinking even as they know better. The work here makes modest claims and acknowledges its own limits. Yet in so doing, it maintains high aspirations.

These artists have chosen painting as their method of argumentation: the grounds on which they argue with themselves, with others, and with the world. Beginning in their studios, they build a vision of the world that they want to see and live in. After all, painting is both an object and an illusion. It can change the world even though it obviously can't.

—Leah Pires and Ezra Tessler

Mequitta Ahuja describes her self-portraits as a mix of personal narrative and references from myth, folklore, and the history of painting from Mughal miniatures to French Impressionism. Echoing the Greek mythological figure of Eurydice, *Border Revealed* probes the limits of seeing and naming.

Mike Cloud plays with the malleability of symbols and signs in paintings that rest on the floor like shrines. Stars, arrows, and triangles are hacked, jammed, and recast through a process at once heavy-handed and precise.

Christhian Diaz felts wool into imagined landscapes that draw on his mother's border crossing, his own experience as a previously undocumented immigrant, and stories shared by the refugees he advocates for through his work as an immigration paralegal.

Louise Fishman's postcard-sized wall reliefs transform found materials into intimate, raw forms that are both figurative and abstract. They convey "a sense of ethics, in the value of labor, in thrift, in being resourceful, scrappy," Ingrid Schaffner has observed.

Lee Lozano cut her own path through the macho landscape of the 1960s with swagger and panache. The painting *Untitled* is from a murky 1962 series populated by noses, airplanes, teeth, genitalia, and ambiguous polyhedrons in various states of entanglement.

Troy Michie's collages juxtapose fragments of men's clothing with found photographs and swatches of color. He's drawn to a kind of camouflage known as disruptive patterning, which breaks an object's contours with brightly contrasting pattern. His figures play hide and seek, blending in and stepping out.

Anne Minich constructs paintings from found objects gifted by friends, memories of love and trauma, and longing for erotic and religious communion. *Landscape (Weehawken)* is an intimate portrait of her decades-long friendship with the artist Juan Gonzalez, who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1993.

Quentin Morris has been making monochromatic black paintings since 1963. In his words, he hopes to "present black's intrinsically enigmatic beauty and infinite depth." His circular canvases are cut by hand and painted flat on the studio floor, where layers of paint accumulate around their edges. Each of his black circles is the same and yet wholly different.

Nancy Shaver gives life to quotidian castoffs sourced from flea markets and yard sales, sometimes placing them in dialogue with artworks loaned from students and friends to create new relationships. She thinks of them as a form of collective history mediated through personal relationships.

Ruth Root's constructions cannibalize desktop jpegs, notes to self, and everyday patterns. *Untitled* includes everything from a section of a Thomas Downing pattern to fragments of Root's earlier paintings. It's the result of sifting through the thoughts, feelings, images, and ideas that race through her mind and the world around her.

Matthew Sepielli makes dense, heavily-worked paintings that attempt to harness seemingly natural phenomena through simple material means. These household icons disclose his interest in the minor histories of American painting—the canon's flipside.

Henry Ossawa Tanner's search for religious feeling led him on a lifelong exploration of painterly gesture and materiality in Paris and beyond. *Street Scene in Tangiers* reveals the spiritual candor of a minister's son on one of his many trips to North Africa.