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## At the Galleries

AN IMPRESSIVELY VARIED GROUP OF EXHIBITIONS on view in New York last fall—if you traveled from the Upper East Side to the Lower East Side, with a small stopover in Tribeca—was proof that painting and drawing, in many different permutations and in different mediums, were not only alive and well today, but also had been for some time. Uptown, at the Met Breuer, “Vija Celmins: To Fix the Image in Memory” offered an illuminating survey of a mysterious artist, spanning five decades of the 81-year-old Celmins’ labor-intensive, ferociously concentrated work. Seen earlier in 2019 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, and organized by SFMoMA’s Gary Garrels and the Met’s Ian Alteveer, the elegantly installed retrospective began with the deadpan “portraits” of the inanimate objects in Celmins’ daily life that she painted in the early 1960s: a glowing space heater, a lamp, a television. These early works announce constants that persist to the present: a palette of silvery grays, a fascination with the ephemeral, and an insistence on stripping everything down to its essence, coupled with scrupulous observation and fastidious execution.

We followed Celmins as she “redescribed” (her word) existing images—her own photographs and others clipped from newspapers—of explosions, fires, or equivocal airplanes. The momentary and the visually elusive are stilled and prolonged by Celmins’ scrutiny and “redescription.” The boundaries between fact and fiction blur. In 1968, she stopped painting entirely in order to concentrate on drawing, relishing the limitation of making pencil marks of differing weights and densities on paper. Some early drawings refer, albeit obliquely, to tragedies and disasters, but the same year, Celmins also began drawing the surface of the sea, based on her own photographs, distilling expanses of agitated water devoid of shoreline or horizon into repetitive, subtly varied strokes, exploring an astonishing range of tonalities, different grays, and delicately inflected marks. She often held the web of marks back from the edge of the paper, leaving untouched neutral zones that remind us of the artifice of her obsessively accurate images. Over the years, Celmins has been similarly preoccupied with isolated chunks of a starry night sky, the irregular, unprepossessing surface of the desert floor, the pitted landscape of the moon, and spider webs—all seemingly impossible subjects that she transforms through

sheer effort and concentration into disembodied all-over images that pulse between radical abstractness and terrifying, non-photographic verisimilitude. Her paintings are astonishingly accomplished, but her drawings are often more compelling, perhaps because the hand is more visible, making us think about the physical process of making rather than about replication of the seen. The most eye-testing works on view were pairs of rocks, one real, one a carefully executed replica. We could tell which was which if we studied the pairs as intensely as Celmins did when making them. The entire show demanded that kind of effort. It was worth it.

A little further uptown, at Acquavella Galleries, “Wayne Thiebaud: Mountains 1965–2019” presented a less familiar aspect of this endlessly inventive painter’s long career. Known best for his seductive, all-American, vernacular still lifes of pie slices, deli counters, gumball machines, and the like, as well as for hieratic, self-contained figures, Thiebaud has long used his acute responses to place as starting points for evocative improvisation and invention. His dizzying equivalents of steep San Francisco streets, his sweeping reminders of the broad delta landscape near Sacramento, where he lives, and this exhibition’s looming, vertiginous forms of his mountain paintings all seem to spring from the same impulse. Asked whether there were actual mountains in Northern California that looked like his images, Thiebaud said that he knew places that *felt* like that.

The most engaging paintings on view kept us off balance, thrusting sheer cliffs and implacable walls of gorgeously hued pigment at us, playing fast and loose with our sense of scale by slowly revealing tiny suggestions of vegetation and human presence at the summits and edges. Just as Thiebaud’s dessert and deli paintings updated the traditional still life as a celebration of diner and lunch counter offerings, his mountain paintings translate the sublime into wholly contemporary painterly terms. Faced with works such as the disquieting *Cliff Road*, the radiant *Rock Island Split*, and the eerie *Mountain Fire* (all 2019), I kept thinking about Turner’s images of passes through the Alps, with their towering mountains, impossibly narrow paths, and minuscule figures in danger of plunging into the chasm below. Thiebaud elicits much of the same awe at the power of nature, as we imagine ourselves teetering on the edge of his cliffs, then pulls us into the present with the delectable physicality of his glowing, layered color and lush, varied paint-handling, making the artist intensely present. Thiebaud celebrated his 99<sup>th</sup> birthday in November. Talk about “late style”! A great many of the paintings at Acquavella—and many of the most striking—were made this year. If Thiebaud were Japanese, he’d have long since be declared a living national treasure. Don’t we have an equivalent American designation for this wonderful artist?

A little farther south, “Henry Taylor: Niece Cousin Kin Look How Long It’s Been” at Blum & Poe offered a generous sampling of mostly recent paintings (and a couple of oddball three-dimensional pieces) by

this tough-minded, Los Angeles-based African-American artist. Taylor's vigorous, take-no-prisoners paintings, dealing with such uncomfortable topics as police brutality, were among the most potent and memorable works in the 2017 Whitney Biennial. The paintings in his current exhibition seemed just as powerful but less angry. Many were nameless portraits, identified as having been made in 2019 in Dakar, Senegal. If we added that information to the show's title, it became impossible not to consider that Taylor was thinking not only about persistent racial inequality in the United States, but also about kinship, continuity, and the African diaspora. The roughly life-size, frontal Senegalese studies, hung salon style, along with a plainspoken self-portrait, were notable for their intimacy, directness, and personality; so were two larger than life male and female Senegalese heads installed elsewhere. The tilt of a head, the splay of braids, a headwrap, or the angle of eyeglasses were all noted, underscoring the differences between broad and narrow faces, necks of different lengths, and varied hairstyles. The whites of wide eyes contrasted dramatically with dark skin.

Elsewhere in the three-level gallery, near-life-size seated figures dominated, mainly of fellow African Americans, including a 2019 portrait of Taylor's fellow artist Glenn Ligon in an ochre armchair and a more introspective 2013 image of the blind poet, publisher, and guru of the Downtown art world, the late Steve Cannon. Ligon confronts us. He's relaxed, hands folded in his lap, seen against a wall of paintings. Cannon, head lowered, is folded in on himself, with brushy zones of color both surrounding and overlapping him. These formal differences not only make for compelling paintings, but also suggest different personalities, different ways of engaging the world. Taylor's social conscience was evident in the exhibition's largest work, an ambitious disquisition on race relations, Asian exploitation of African resources, and other problematic topics. The mural-size frieze of expressively drawn black and white figures, maps, diagrams, and provocative phrases filled an entire wall, floor to ceiling, demanding that we immerse ourselves in its complex, layered images and disjunctive phrases, and try to tease out its message.

Taylor, like his predecessor, Robert Colescott, is a virtuoso of expressive paint-handling, of emotion-charged gesture, and of eloquent distortion. He moves pigment around with energy and shifts the proportions of his figures to emphasize how particular people sit or stand and the ways their bodies articulate space. His color is saturated and rich, with luminous pinks and reds, singing yellows and brushy greens played against darks and neutrals; all of these hues conspire to enhance a wide range of warm brown flesh tones. Those browns are strikingly subtle and diverse, both tonally and chromatically, and further modulated to suggest bulk and mass. White skin is painted more schematically. It's worth comparing Taylor's nuanced use of color, as well as his loose, spontaneous touch, with Amy Sherald's more restrained, formulaic approach to skin tones, drawing, and surface. In

her paintings of standing figures, seen at Hauser and Wirth last fall, skin tones are always a neatly applied, flat, unvarying graphite gray, surrounded by equally tidy zones of high key color, and corralled by academically correct drawing. We're told that the inert skin color was chosen for its neutrality, but unlike the fierce black that Kerry James Marshall turns into both a potent metaphor and an important compositional component, Sherald's flat gray rarely seems to work with the brilliant hues of the rest of the painting. Her highly accomplished, elegant paintings appear to be the result of a repeatable series of predetermined moves guaranteed to produce a handsome, plausible result. Taylor's images, by contrast, are refreshingly unpredictable, a little awkward, in an invigorating way, and always seem to have been triggered by uncalculated, deeply felt responses to an immediate, sometimes ambiguous situation. One of the most arresting of the exhibition's larger portraits presented an anonymous, three quarter length white-haired man in white, holding what seemed to be a cane, caught in the middle of an intersection defined by vivid greens and geometric bars of white. The gray of the roadways framed the oval of the protagonist's body like a cross. The picture provoked admiration for the economy with which a distinct individual was conjured up, as well as for the bravura paint-handling. But at the same time it triggered a host of ruminations about age, mobility, and even, because of the cane and the figure's white clothing, the state of health care in this country. Like all of Taylor's work, the painting seemed at once artless and inevitable.

"Larry Poons: 'First Thought, Best Thought'—The Particle Paintings (1996–2002)," at Yares Art, reviewed some of what may be this brilliant, idiosyncratic painter's most idiosyncratic works: paintings constructed with declarative, expansive, almost cartoon-like shapes and dazzling color, animated by aggressive patterns and applied textures that threaten to subsume chromatic variation. For all their eccentricity, the series developed logically from the cascading Throw pictures that Poons had been making well into the 1980s, seen at Yares in 2018. As the Throw pictures evolved, Poons began to add more and more substantial substances to the surface of the canvas, everything from crumpled paper and batting to discrete units, to interrupt and deflect the downward flow of the liquid paint, prefiguring the unpredictable attached elements that enliven the Particle Paintings. Poons reveals, as well, that the collaged shapes were the result of his wanting to make sculpture. "I couldn't figure out a way to do that," he says, "so I put everything onto the canvas." Some of his rarely exhibited drawings suggest that the bold, jazzy "imagery" of the Particle Paintings may have its origins, somewhere, somehow, in the artist's experience—from things seen on television to the landscape and streetscape rushing by him when he rides his motorcycle and, I suspect, a good deal more that remains unnamed.

I remember seeing Particle Paintings when the series was first exhibited and being simultaneously fascinated, entranced, and baffled.

Like the projecting, glitter-encrusted, scrawled-on constructions of Poons's friend and coeval Frank Stella, the Particle Paintings initially seemed to test the limits of what was possible, threatening to cross over into some uncharted non-art territory. Today, Poons's brash, no-holds-barred canvases read as opulent, playful, and fearless, or, to find an art historical analogy, they seem like completely contemporary versions of an extravagant, over-the-top High Baroque aesthetic with a large admixture of wit. (So do Stella's complex, projecting paintings.) Like Stella, Poons has never allowed himself to settle into a comfortable "signature" approach but instead has followed his intuition and experience, responding to the implications of each work as it evolves and pursuing them, often into startlingly new regions. We never know where Poons will go next, nor, I suspect, does he. Unexpectedness, audacity, and ravishing color are the only constants in his impressive body of work. It's time for a full-scale retrospective at a major museum. In the meantime, we're fortunate that over the past few years, Yares has been devoting monographic shows to different aspects of Poons's work, past and present.

Another equally irreverent but, at the same time, equally serious approach was announced by "Gregory Coates: Actual and Implied," at Monica King Contemporary, in Tribeca. Coates has frequently deployed unexpected found objects and materials in his work. There have been series made of transformed inner tubes and repurposed pallets that depended on the artist's accepting and altering their textures and colors, disciplining the insistent physicality and wide-ranging associations of his materials with minimalist, pared-down forms. The works in Coates's recent show, made between 2016 and 2019, were mainly constructed with coarse, bristly deck brushes, meant for scrubbing recalcitrant surfaces, arranged in neat grids, bristles facing out. Some were coated with saturated color—luminous blues and oranges—as though the brushes had been dipped briefly in paint or some other, more unlikely substance—including mud—picking up just enough to change subtly the character of the rough-hewn expanse. Coates refers to these works as the Cornrow series, an allusion to traditional African and African-American hairstyle.

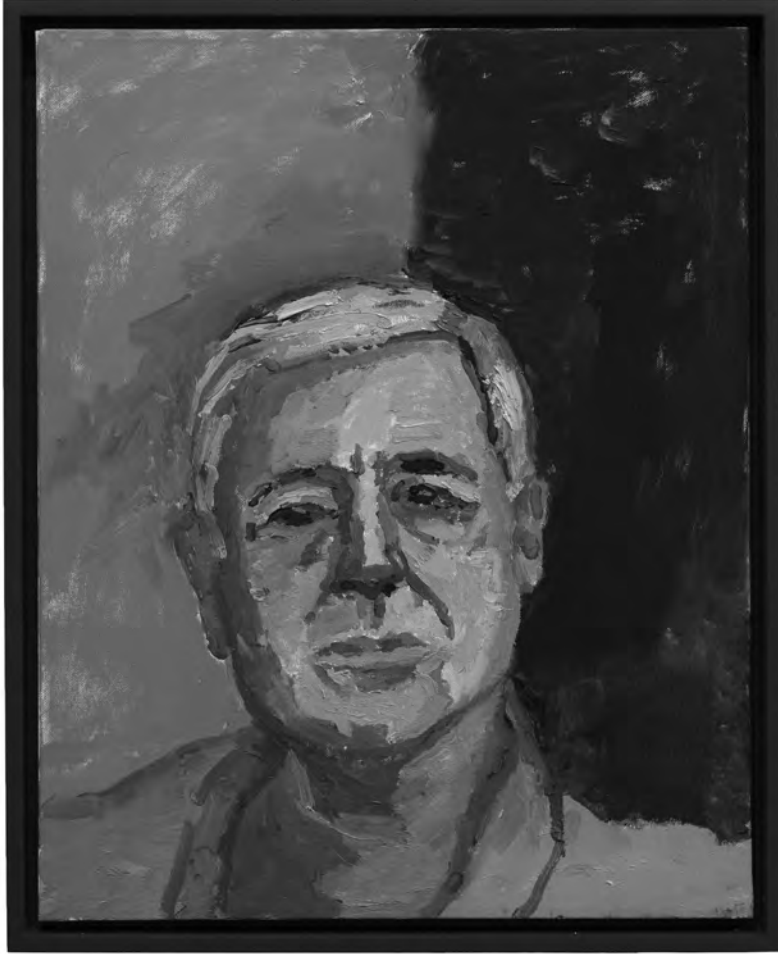
The brushes are almost entirely subsumed by Coates's foursquare arrangements and judicious addition of color. We follow the rhythmic interior inflections of the neat stacks and rows and note the variations in the surface, as if we were contemplating a rockface. We become so engaged by those surfaces, especially in works such as the dark, brooding, squared-off *Here* (2019) or its enormous, horizontal, even more somber counterpart, *My Big Brown Peace* (2019), that it is a surprise to encounter an end view and realize the identity of the building blocks of the confrontational expanse. Yet that previous identity is important. The series was dedicated to Coates's grandmother, a domestic worker, for whom the scrubbing brush would have had entirely different connotations. Even if we know nothing of this or fail

to grasp what the paintings are made of, we can't avoid feeling acutely the tension between the cool, pared-down elegance of the Cornrow series and the visible robustness and brutality, the haunting tactility of the paintings' surfaces. Did the title's "actual and implied" refer to this kind of opposition? Maybe.

At Betty Cuninghame Gallery, on the Lower East Side, "Graham Nickson: Eye Level" surprised even those who have been following the work of this British-born, New York painter for decades. Known for his large, enigmatic gatherings of agile full-length bathers, evocations of a modern-day Arcadia furnished with lifeguard's chairs and beach towels, and for superheated skiescapes, Nickson showed a series of about two dozen portrait heads, most of them painted in 2019. A small number had been made about fifteen years ago, while an intimate canvas about 10 inches square, one of the few where the sitter did not confront the viewer, dated from 1972, when Nickson was juxtaposing rows of small related paintings with his larger ones, modern versions of the predella panels of early Renaissance devotional works. Despite the existence of these precursors, he had never exhibited any of the single heads before. And, it's worth noting that unlike the subjects in the recent exhibition of single heads, the figures in Nickson's large paintings of bathers frequently turn away from us or cover their heads in some way. A figure who faces us is usually an exception. Each of Nickson's cast of characters in his beach paintings exists as an identifiable personage—the man drying his back, the person doing the headstand, the balloon woman—who often recurs in different paintings, yet their identities are most clearly established by their poses, and they seem more significant as components of a complex whole than as individuals.

The initial surprise of seeing a group of single heads by Nickson notwithstanding, the directness and material forthrightness of the recent portraits may have been their most striking quality. As we studied each one, we were quickly captured by the bold, staccato touches of the brush, the modulations of color temperature, the intensity with which the sitter often stared back at us. A male head, titled *The Observer* (2019), was among the most compelling works in the series. The silver-haired sitter eluded our gaze, tilting his head slightly. But what really held our attention was the way the broad, emphatically placed planes of brow, cheek, and chin responded, spatially, to the assertive vertical division of the wall behind him, half black, half gray. The memory of Matisse's Fauvist heads made itself felt. So did Cézanne's slow accumulations of touches. But the painting, like all the others in the show, had its own distinct character. Nickson describes himself as being struck by the presence of the single heads, when he looked at them as a group, a presence he terms "awkward and insistent." It's an apt characterization. The best paintings of the series are somewhat uncomfortable, because of our awareness of the slow, repetitive process of their making, and also impossible to ignore.

For initiates, most of Nickson's sitters were identifiable—fellow artists, a gallerist, an art historian, all part of his circle—but likeness was



Graham Nickson (British, b. 1946), *The Observer*, 2019. Oil on canvas. 20 x 16 inches. © Betty Cuninghame Gallery. Photo credit: Lexi Campbell.

plainly not the issue. His single heads are no more literal than the hieratic, solemn bathers in his beach paintings or the burning metaphors for sunrise and sunset in his landscapes. The overall fabric of paint was clearly of more concern to Nickson than the particularities of individual features. Likeness seemed to have emerged almost inadvertently, an unwilling result of intense scrutiny and of concentrating on translating the perception of planar and spatial relationships into mark-making, all but detached from thinking about what those planes comprise. In some ways, it's the effort to reconcile the insistent presence of the sitter with the equally insistent presence of the painting as a *made*, autonomous object that makes Nickson's single heads so engaging. It will be interesting to see whether he continues to make portraits and, if so, whether he will show them.