

ARTNEWS

Degrees of Mystery: B. Wurtz on Exhibitions Around New York

BY *B. Wurtz* POSTED 02/27/19 11:11 AM

On Lorraine O'Grady, Tauba Auerbach, Christine Rebet, Seth Price, Michael Krebber, and more



John Houck, *Unstable Figure*, 2018, archival pigment print, 31½ x 37½ inches. Marianne Boesky Gallery.

OBJECT STUDIES/©JOHN HOUCK/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY, NEW YORK AND ASPEN

In December I spent a few days looking at gallery exhibitions in New York. I saw things on the Lower East Side and made a couple of trips to Chelsea. Of course I missed a lot too, as happens to so many of us in this city blessed with more art offerings than anywhere else in the world. We live our busy lives. This wonderful gift can also be a bit overwhelming.

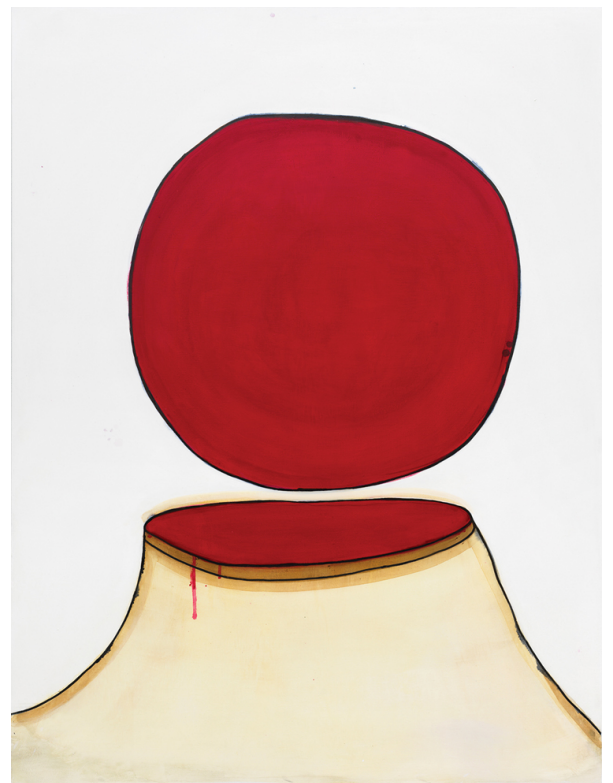
Or perhaps better to say underwhelming. In so much art you see these days, the meaning is immediately, painfully obvious; it's art that treats the viewer as something of an imbecile with no imagination. And so I am pleased to say that, going around in December, I was met with a degree of mystery. The works I saw led me to unexpected places. It was fun to find myself thinking, What the hell am I looking at?

Chapter NY showed work by an artist named **Autumn Ramsey**, whose paintings were all medium or small in size but rather intense. There was something refreshingly emotional and out of the ordinary about them, what struck me first being their unusual mixture of colors. The grays made the other colors more potent. Then there was the imagery, seemingly from other times: animals, birds, human figures, which brought to mind paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art that hang far from the modern rooms. Still, my first impression was: light fare.

But then themes began to emerge, notably death. For example, one work shows a bird of prey clutching a limp monkey, and another, an upside-down goose looking decidedly not alive. I'm not someone who would particularly relate to artworks about death, but then of course there is Goya, one of my absolute favorite artists. In Ramsey's works the death theme is so subtle that it made me more willing to contemplate it. There was also a painting called *Psyche*, in which a nude woman was depicted with a beast-type head. It made me think of all those figurative paintings in which a nude figure, the person posing in the artist's studio, becomes a kind of object. What thoughts might be swirling around in that person's head

Nearby, at **Bureau**, was a show by **Christine Rebet** that comprised wall works and two films. The theme was Mesopotamia, and the show toggled between the legend of how a temple came to be built there in the 22nd century B.C. and the story of a present-day destruction of an ancient vase. Rebet's paintings have a lightness and airiness to them, an almost cartoon quality. One work shows illustrated pottery vessels and another, a fragment of a larger vessel, executed in a drippy, faded-watercolor style. It was a curious approach to such heavy subject matter, and I saw an interesting relationship with the work of Ramsey, whose paintings also had a kind of sketchiness to them. This underworked quality pointed to the fragility of memory.

In her leap from the origins of civilization to the contemporary wrecking of a cultural artifact—a dizzying compression of time—Rebet got me thinking, but not by particularly didactic means, about what mixed bags we are as human beings, so creative and, at the same time, so incredibly destructive. I read an article (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/09/18/the-case-against-civilization>) a while ago in the *New Yorker* about hunter-gatherers. They had in many ways a much more reasonable and fair way of life than ours today, so much more in harmony with the planet. Then the storage of grain changed all that. Along came autocrats, slavery, greed, war, etc., but also art, literature, and the mind-boggling brilliance of what we could call culture.



Christine Rebet, *Sunset Stage 2*, 2018, acrylic and ink on canvas, 48 × 36 inches. Bureau.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND BUREAU, NEW YORK

At **Marianne Boesky** I saw **John Houck**'s exhibition. Fascinating. There was a lot going on there, on many levels, an unusual mash-up of painting, photography, and sculpture. There were photographs of arrangements of other photographs, paintings, and pieces of colored paper. Other works were actual pieces of colored paper with actual creases.

Sound confusing? It was. I was very aware of my physical body and my proximity to the works in the room. Standing in the middle of the space, I took delight simply in the palette and composition of the pieces. But there was that question in my mind: "What exactly am I looking at?" Up close, I was none the wiser.

What an artwork is made of and how it's made are always super interesting to me. Houck's work reminded me of how quickly we tend to process that first step of art viewing—determining what an artwork is made of—and then immediately move on to other aspects of the piece. I instead enjoyed lingering on the question of what exactly these things were and questioning assumptions we make about art. There was an openness to the imagery that, while perhaps personal to the artist, still engaged my imagination.

I walked into **Seth Price**'s show at **Petzel** thinking I had a pretty good idea of what I was going to see. I felt familiar with his work and assumed I'd see some monochrome vacuforms. Instead, I found something extremely strange, and loved the experience.

The installation was as fantastic as the works. Yes, the objects filled a gallery and did have an art-like presence in the form of "paintings," "photos," and "video work." But beyond that, it became disorienting trying to discern exactly what kind of art it was. The show had a wonderfully perplexing title, too: "Hell Has Everything." I found the confusion to be stimulating rather than annoying. It was as if I had arrived on another planet.

I think a lot of the appeal had to do with the rich compositions and colors—or in some cases, lack of color. Take for example the two black-and-white LED light boxes involving photographic fragments of what I assumed to be human flesh. They were already powerful enough, even without the words "New York City" embroidered down at the bottom in pink thread, with additional threads hanging below the edge of the support. What might have seemed arbitrary instead added to the mystery.



Seth Price, *Untitled*, 2015–18, dye-sublimation print on synthetic fabric, embroidery, aluminum, LED matrix, 80 x 90 x 4 inches.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PETZEL, NEW YORK

A mesmerizing video of a stream of unidentifiable red blobs was installed on the ceiling of one room, and in the largest room, except for one "painting" by itself on a wall, the works were all closely gathered in a back corner, as if they had been in a box that had been tipped in that direction.

Taub Auerbach, at Paula Cooper, put me in a similar frame of mind: Again, visually gripping pieces drew me in, but there was that same question of being uncertain about what I was seeing. There were intricately colored and patterned wall works and a couple of strange sculptures containing delicate glass tubing. The rigor and perfection of Auerbach's pieces suggested the work of a scientist.

I liked the span of time hinted at by using old-fashioned graphic techniques that could be found in books. I felt honored to be the viewer and have my mind stimulated. Music was an integral part of the video on display. And it wasn't just tacked-on music for this both simple and complex work. The music and the filmed visuals were each other's *raison d'être*.

Thinking about the luscious formal qualities of those Auerbachs brings me to my experience viewing the Stanley Whitney two-venue exhibition at Lisson's Chelsea spaces. At the larger space on West 24th Street, I was dumbstruck by the paintings. I have long been a fan of Whitney's colored-blocked abstractions but had never seen so many of them at one time. There was that gut reaction of just looking at color, but then I was put in mind of just what it means to be a human, the miraculous aspect of it. My eyes darted from one colored section to another. Why was I suddenly infatuated with that dark blue? Why was I so enthralled with the experience of moving to another nearby section of that same blue? It was a pleasure to luxuriate in all that intense color, to experience the mind of an artist, and perhaps it was the healthiest way in that moment to counter the political insanity all around us.

Seeing the works in Lisson's smaller space on 10th Avenue, I was delighted in how art is all about subtleties. Here was that same artist's quirky personal system of making works, but so much brushier—similar but oh, so different.



Stanley Whitney, *They Came Dancing*, 2018, 96 x 96 inches.
©STANLEY WHITNEY/COURTESY LISSON GALLERY

Another gorgeous show of painting was Michael Krebber's at Greene Naftali. In some ways, the exhibition was rather shocking. We don't think twice about minimal monochrome paintings these days, but there is still something radical about white ones with ever-so-slight marks on them.

Most of the paintings had a bit of fleshy, light-mud color on them, and two had blue. Two little blue ponds in the middle of a desert. The various marks invigorated my mind, and I started to see different things: figures, etc., but enjoyed coming back to the idea that perhaps they were just abstract marks. It's such a generous offering to the viewer's imagination.

It's also thrilling to be in the presence of someone I would equate with a master calligrapher. What stuck with me long after I saw the show was the contrast between my impression when I first walked into the gallery and my feeling when I departed: What at first appeared to be faded works that had been pulled into the background later seemed thrust aggressively forward.



Michael Krebber, *Herbes de Provence, Gitanes*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 45 x 40 inches. Greene Naftali.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK



Lorraine O'Grady, *Cutting Out CONYT 09*, 2018, letterpress printing on Japanese paper, cutout, collage on laid paper, 41¼ x 60 inches. Alexander Gray Associates.

©LORRAINE O'GRADY AND ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/COURTESY ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK

Another exhibition with seemingly slight gestures was Lorraine O'Grady's latest at Alexander Gray Associates, which featured elegant white-framed works made with a very simple formula: Headlines and other cutout text fragments from newspapers were mounted on white backgrounds.

Angled and seemingly random, the fragments of text formed poetic sentences. "The parent that refused to die." "In the amber glow of August skin there is no escape from terror." There was a lot of humor, but darker themes also emerged. It brought to mind John Baldessari's work.

And there was more to the works: they weren't actually made with newspaper. They were print works mimicking cutout and pasted newsprint, evoking that direct approach through more sophisticated means. I loved seeing the artist's mind at work, but there was a funny distance to her approach. A message from another realm could be embedded in these pieces, a message the artist herself might not have lodged in them. It's a wonderful quality that can be a part of art: not fully knowing or understanding it.

B. Wurtz is a New York-based artist.

A version of this story originally appeared in the Spring 2019 issue of *ARTnews* on page 94 under the title "Around New York."

Correction 07/15/2015, 9:30 a.m.: *An earlier version of this article misidentified the title of the Christina Rebet painting in a photo caption. The post has been updated to reflect this.*

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