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The Women's Rooms

A walk round Brooklyn and Manhattan galleries reveals the work of both new and well-known women artists.

Vincent Katz, Monday, 27th April 2009

I was having lunch with a painter, a curator, and an editor. Someone said they thought a number of painters currently enjoying prominent exhibitions in New York were not worth looking at. This made me think about a perennial problem – how does one stay in touch with developments that don't touch one viscerally? Some people, as they age, want to hold on only to what they once knew. It made me realise how hard it is to keep one's eyes and mind fresh, to be able to think that at any moment the next great thing may be around the corner.

New York has a variety of possibilities for seeing new art: museum shows, galleries and alternative spaces strung throughout the city. One area that is essential to visit if you want to know what is going on in the city is Brooklyn. It is a borough composed of many neighbourhoods, so it may not be easy to grasp all at once, but for years now, gallery-goers have been making the circuit. Williamsburg and Dumbo (an acronym for Down Under Manhattan Bridge) are the prime neighborhoods, but there are others, including Bushwick, Fort Greene, Greenpoint and Park Slope. These and others, such as Boerum Hill, Clinton Hill and Gowanus, are also increasingly places where artists are choosing to live and have their studios.

On a recent visit, I encountered some of the most interesting art I'd seen in a while. The best part was they were things I was unprepared for, by artists I did not know. I started in Williamsburg, at Front Room Gallery on Roebling Street (Fig. 2). It is one of the older Brooklyn galleries, having been around since 1999. Its blurb says it favours conceptual and 'non-commercial' art, but on the day I was there I was amazed by Emily Roz's large, highly detailed coloured-pencil drawings of animals in beautiful settings involved in life-and-death struggles. Front Room also produces an intriguing line of multiples.

Momenta Art, on Bedford Avenue, is a not-for-profit space that promotes the work of emerging artists and welcomes submissions. The day I went there was a group exhibition, entitled 'The Mood Back Home', in response to a 1972 feminist project entitled 'Womanhouse'. From the two graffiti paintings on the gallery façade, you could tell this generation of feminists had a different look (Fig. 5). Inside, the work examined issues of domesticity, gender and career in aesthetically satisfying ways. Pieces ranged from Tara Mateik's humorously titled Putting The Balls Away, a 1970s globe-shaped tv set playing the historic Billie Jean King versus Bobby Riggs tennis match, to Suzy Spence's Red Grooms-like painted-paper diorama, Auctionhouse, to Pam Butler's shape-shifting lipstick drawings. I came away impressed by the curatorial acumen (it was organised by two of the artists – Spence and Leslie Brack), Momenta's staging of such an ambitious project, and the quality of the work.

Williamsburg has other well-known galleries, including McCaig-Welles Gallery, Pierogi, Sideshow Gallery and Slate Gallery. A little further south is Dumbo, another gallery quarter, where destinations include A.I.R. Gallery, Amos Eno Gallery, and Smack Mellon. At A.I.R., on Front Street, I saw a show of provocative paintings by Susan Bee, who is known for her collaborative book projects with poets. Her typical subjects include sexy femmes fatales, appropriated from pulp fiction book covers and collaged onto her paintings. These and other figures are then insinuated into garishly coloured, somewhat apocalyptic landscapes. While maintaining these basic motifs, her paint handling and compositions in her new works allowed for stronger, more definitive statements than she previously achieved.

One of the artists dismissed at lunch was Marlene Dumas, who recently had a mid-career retrospective organised by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and at The Menil Collection, Houston, until 21 June. It's funny how one can be influenced by the opinion of others – it would be nice to cross that one off the list without having to see it. But it would be a grave mistake. Dumas, unlike Elizabeth Peyton, who recently had a retrospective at the New Museum here, is ambitious and all over the place with respect to her technique, as much as subject matter. Where Peyton captures people's imaginations by her wilful focusing on a specific cultural milieu, with the scale and paint-handling of her works restrained to match, Dumas almost frightens viewers, or seduces by shocking them. It is difficult to take your eyes from her depictions of brutality, banal sexual exposure, powerless infancy, and expressionless death (Fig. 4). Although many of her images are appropriated from the media, giving them a cultural immediacy, she puts them through a hard-won filter of painterly performance. Missing out on that would be missing out on a major voice of our times.

Finally, and keeping to theme of women, I saw three exceptional exhibitions by women who have been painting and exhibiting for decades. Lois Dodd and Jane Freilicher first showed in New York in the 1950s, and Janet Fish in the 1960s; all three are not only going strong but reaching into new areas in their commitment to the art of painting. Freilicher had her first show with the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, Fifth Avenue, in 1952. Her recent show with the same gallery included work from the 1970s to today. One could see her concerns – painting what she sees out her window in the country or city in a steady way – have not changed, but her attitude to paint and form have. In her most recent works, an exciting unmooring of shapes from their depicted realities is evident; building façades suddenly become an array of floating rectangles (Fig. 1).

Dodd's show at Alexandre Gallery at 41 East 57th Street took a single motif – houses on fire – as an avenue to paint a substance, which, like water or clouds, is notoriously difficult to pin down (Fig. 3). As in her night paintings, so here the drama of the situation feels domestic; the painter uses it as a diversion, while leaving its interpretation to the viewer to decide (until 25 April). Fish's exhibition at DC Moore Gallery on Fifth Avenue confirmed this artist's consistent delving into fantastic worlds of colour and texture, simultaneously made-up and palpably real.