

What I'm Looking At: Cavorting Human-Duck Hybrids, a Tribute to a Legendary Alt-Art Magazine, and Other Things at the Edge of Art

Highlights from New York galleries from the last few weeks.

Ben Davis, May 5, 2023



Hugh Hayden, *Shadow* (2023) in "Maiden Voyage" at CLEARING. Photo by Ben Davis. "What I'm Looking At" is a monthly column where I digest art worth seeing, writings worth consuming, and other tidbits I come across in my quest to absorb the contemporary cultural moment. Below, assorted thoughts from April 2023.

More Pombo, Please!

The most unexpected find this month was at Barro NYC, an art gallery from Buenos Aires with a space in the weird faux New England fishing village-themed mall that is the South Street Seaport. The current show, “Artisanal Conceptualism: Starting Point” (through May 21) features a small selection of deliriously interesting works by Argentine artist Marcelo Pombo (b. 1959).

The centerpiece of the show is the “Dibujos de San Pablo” series he made during a formative trip to Brazil in 1982, a suite of black-and-white drawings featuring duck-billed lovers intertwined and other fantasies of queer beach life strained through a kind of “dirty Disney” look. There’s other good stuff, too, including a trio of delightfully eccentric contemporary abstractions and some dense graphics he made for Sodoma, a magazine put out by an 1980s gay rights collective of which Pombo was a part.

My only complaint: Not enough Pombo! “Artisanal Conceptualism” is too small to render anything like a complete portrait of this artist—but it is just enough to suggest that I would *like* a complete portrait of this artist.



Drawing from Marcelo Pombo’s “Dibujos de San Pablo” (1982). Photo: Ben Davis.

Catch “Lost” If You Can

I caught Ficre Ghebreyesus’s second show at Galerie Lelong just in time (it’s open through May 6), and am glad I did. The Eritrea-born artist ran a café in New Haven and died in 2012 without having shown a lot of his works. Posthumously, his fame has expanded and he won a plum spot in the Venice Biennale last year. Even when the works might be seen as flirting with folk-art clichés (skeletons, dancers), they have a distinct atmosphere, simultaneously direct and dreamy, sophisticated and rather dashing.

I Believe We Are Lost (2002) gives the show its name, a large work that looks like a banner of some kind, done on unstretched canvas, featuring an uneasy trio of jagged monsters framed in a sea of deep blue. But I really like the allover scrap-quilt style of something like *Five Figures with Horse Head* (1999), with the richness of its colors and the specificity of its details.



Ficre Ghebreyesus, *I Believe We Are Lost* (2002). Photo: Ben Davis.

Rite-On

The back of the Printed Matter bookstore in Chelsea is worth visiting right now for the packed vitrines dedicated to “From the Margins: The Making of Art-Rite” (on view through June 21). Founded in 1973 by the late Edit DeAk (the stuff here comes from her collection), Walter Robinson, and Joshua Cohn, *Art-Rite* was a free-spirited alternative art publication with a programmatically scrappy style (the title was a play on the budget store Shop-Rite).

Art-Rite was a vehicle for plenty of intense, inventive thinking about the big issues of its day. Here, though, the behind-the-scenes photos of the editors, shown with their stitched-together print layouts and *Art-Rite* posters and cover art, really do radiate the excitement of an art mag that was a creative project itself. The show makes you remember that covering the art scene should be fun first and a professional obligation second.



“From the Margins: The Making of Art-Rite” at Printed Matter. Photo: Ben Davis.

Clearing Comes Back

Clearing gallery has left Bushwick and is now a stone's throw from the New Museum in Manhattan. The new space doesn't have quite the same yawning industrial charm as the Bushwick one. But "Maiden Voyage," its opening group show (through May 21), makes a pretty convincing case for the gallery with a selection of artists to be proud of. It's all killer, no filler, down to some delightful seating-options-as-art.



Hugh Hayden, *Shadow* (2023) and Calvin Marcus, *Dead Soldier* (2018) in "Maiden Voyage" at CLEARING. Photo by Ben Davis.

Fun With Dots

Of things I read this month, the one that stands out in my mind is actually John Elderfield's two-part opus on the history of dots in Euro-American art in—that's right—*Gagosian* magazine. It's a fun kind of article: an expansive, informed ramble across art history, from how dots were long frowned on in textiles because they reminded people of skin disease to a theorization of the "film mode" versus "surface mode" of dotting.



Georges-Pierre Seurat, *Seascape (Gravelines)* (1890). Photo: Heritage Art/Heritage Images via Getty Images.

Buy It Now!

There's a Jenny Holzer-themed condom for sale on Ebay. It's \$119.99. The condition says "Used," but don't worry, I think they just mean it has been used *as art*.

Jenny Holzer Tenderly condom truism creator projects

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Screenshot of Jenny Holzer condom, for sale on Ebay.

A Few Words on NFT.NYC...

Finally, at the beginning of the month I did go back to NFT.NYC, the big crypto-art/crypto-business/crypto-whatever conference that is now held in the Javits Center.

The first time I went to NFT.NYC, in the heady days of 2021, it felt as if everyone was high. It was just at the moment when the drugs were hitting hardest and people are screaming at each other, “We should buy a boat together!!!” Now it feels like everyone has come down and people are kind of looking around at each other and saying, “So...are we still serious about that boat?”

I should say I only went on Friday, the last day of the conference. I can't speak for the whole thing. Maybe people were tuckered out from the great stuff they saw the previous days. But most of the art talks I went to were attended by the merest smatterings of people.

Don't get me wrong: I saw plenty of people still trying to make an earnest go of it. Most memorably, I sat in on curator Stacy Engman's talk, the actual title of which, as printed in the program, was: “Most Expensive NFT Stacy Engman Art History NFT Project—\$450 Million NFT Value Pegged to Fine Art Market.” The tone of the Engman's presentation was much less haywire than that manic word salad. Still—it was hard to figure out what she was selling, and that's kinda where things are at as a whole.



Sign for NFT.NYC 2023 at the Javits Center. Photo: Ben Davis.



Curator Stacy Engman presents at NFT.NYC. Photo: Ben Davis.



A panel at NFT.NYC 2023. Photo: Ben Davis.



A vendor booth at NFT.NYC 2023. Photo: Ben Davis.

Bored Ape Takes the Stage, Cannot Hold Mic Straight

Some people will tell you that the parties are where the real action is at during NFT.NYC. I will have to take their word for it. The one I was invited to this time around was put on by Nolcha Shows at the new immersive art venue known as the ArtDistrict in Williamsburg, billed as “a state-of-the-art, next-level 360-degree visual experience.” In practice this meant that, as at many parties and concerts, it had big light projections all over the walls, except these were from a coterie of NFT artists.

The air of rented decadence was set by the presence of a team of go-go dancers in metal bikinis and capes with lights on them. Partygoers stood around talking about liquidity and fractional lending protocols. There were VIP booths composed of what appeared to be park benches. Someone pitched me on an NFT that would allow me access to a whiskey subscription service.

The big draw here was the debut performance by Shilly, an act from the Bored Ape enthusiast/content creator Shwaz that is built around a Bored Ape avatar. Shilly has so far released two songs, I'm Boring and Elizabeth Holmes, both of which almost rise to level of creative vision and soulful authenticity of Fall Out Boy's Ghostbusters cover.

I found the atmosphere at this event draining and I did not have the stamina to stick around to watch Shilly strap on his motion-capture helmet to perform in-character as Bored Ape #6722.

I've seen the tape though, and I have no regrets. It's linked below.



A dancer performing. Photo: Ben Davis.



A glamorous VIP table. Photo: Ben Davis.

<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/marcelo-pombo-ficre-ghebreyesus-art-rite-nftnyc-2295543>