

“Doing What Comes Naturally: Seven Painters in Their Prime” Tom McGlynn, Brooklyn Rail. July 2019.

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BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen | “Doing What Comes Naturally: Seven Painters in Their Prime”



Joyce Robins, *Untitled 13*, 2018. Oil and linen on panel, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy the Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation.

The boldly cliché title of this show is turned inside out in the introductory paragraph to curator Robert Storr’s catalog essay in which he clarifies that “art, by definition, is artificial and *unnatural*. What artists do is create visual and tactile realities that would never exist at all but for their intuition, insight and determination.” With this helpful disbursal of essentialist notions of painting’s use value as pre-determined, naturalized (dead or alive) metaphor, Storr clears a way for these paintings’ “natures” to freely contradict themselves and for

the viewer to juggle and risk toppling their own perceptual theories in advance of actual perception. The implacable here-ness of painting seems to be the aim of this grouping which, for the most part, exudes a subtle yet insistent haecceity.

It’s worth introducing the context of the show in relation to its subtext. The Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation is one of the newest assets to enhance the Lower East Side’s growing number of art venues. Housed in a former synagogue in what was Resnick’s long-term studio, the building’s four floors have been transformed into a mini Kunsthalle, the second floor of which is currently dedicated to a selection of Resnick’s darkly monumental and heavily encrusted canvases. Passlof, his wife, had her studio in another abandoned synagogue around the block on Forsyth Street. The painters Tom Nozkowski and Joyce Robins (another artist couple—Robins’s work is featured in the show), shared studio space in yet another old synagogue located on Hester Street. These relatively small “pocket synagogues” were raised by immigrant

communities often tied to specific towns or villages in the Old World and therefore originally represented strategic sanctuaries. A contextual correspondence can be made between what became a downtown congregation of art friends after the initial demographic of the synagogues moved on. In consideration of the works on view, Storr's curatorial criteria embraces both painting as phenomenal process (emphasizing the tactility of the picture plane—Resnick's forte) and as quirky formalism (more Passlof's purview). In total effect the show presents an affiliation of painters "keeping the faith" (according to Storr), in order to discover what revelations painting has yet to impart. Their inclinations simultaneously represent an homage to the stylistic range of the Resnick/Passlof nexus. The works are sensitively chosen and arranged toward this combined purpose.



Nathalie Provosty, *Therefor*, 2018. Oil on linen, 92 x 84 inches. Image courtesy Nathalie Karg Gallery.

Installed on the first floor are works by Nathalie Provosty, Rebecca Purdum, Riley Brewster and Denzil Hurley. An overall tone of gravity and contemplation pervades the room in tangential reference to the brooding and dark Resnick paintings on the floor directly above including *Burned O* (1983). This cycle of the artist's work, dating from 1975 through 1987, presides with a negative magnetism that seems to draw all four floors of the Foundation toward its influence. Storr's choice to include primarily dark and closely valued paintings on the first floor inevitably resonates harmonically with the Resnicks above. A large, vertically oriented painting by

Provosty, *Therefor* (2018) holds the back wall with its heraldic figuration of tightly choreographed curves, drawn then quartered via a superimposed rectilinear geometry and a combination of matte and glossy oil paint. Her simmering control of value and surface invites one's "eyes' bidding the slow cycle of disclosure."¹ The painting's emblematic power is modulated and sweetened somewhat in the two much smaller and more chromatically delicate paintings by the artist hanging in the stairwell landing. Next to claim one's attention is a painting/relief/sculpture by Denzil Hurley entitled *Glyph Within, Without and About #2* (2016 – 2018) in which four dark gray panels of disproportionate symmetry are joined together in a rough pinwheel-like format and propped by sticks extending to the floor. Three of Hurley's four works include sculptural interventions. In *Cut Out/Redact* (2016 – 2018) he actually cuts into the customarily inviolable planar premise of the stretched canvas. In this regard he could be considered the more heretical zealot of the painterly faith keepers here. The two remaining painters on this floor come closest to

Resnick's tactility. Riley Brewster's three canvases each share the older painter's tendency to mix variously hued pigments until their physical properties force an assimilation of tone towards the achromatic. The overall effect of Brewster's approach—as exemplified in the delicately wrought *crow town* (2018)—shares a poetic heritage in the landscape genre of Whistler's dusky “symphonies” and J.H. Twachtman's wintry harmonics. Brewster, like his precedents, pushes a tension between barely-perceived, deep landscape space and the immediately felt field of pigment on canvas. Something similar occurs in Rebecca Purdum's five paintings. Purdum actually met and became friends with Resnick and Passlof who were mentors at Skowhegan when Purdum was in residence in the summer 1981. She maintained contact upon returning to New York as her studio was in close proximity to theirs, and continued this contact, especially with Passlof, when Purdum decamped the city for the Breadloaf Wilderness of Vermont. A cycle of three of her more recent paintings, including the ethereal yet anchored *Raft* (2018) are a summary complement to the other works on the first floor. They share a dark tonal range and a mindfully discrete modulation of that range in increments of color harmonics via tactile acuity (Purdum often paints with her fingers) and a direct, marginally differentiated format.

The fourth floor selection contains a mix of works that share a lighter and perhaps more playful attitude toward color in its application in various forms, the most antic of which have to be the four paintings of John Obuck. In *The Stack* (2018) one gets served a Dagwood sandwich of tottering lozenges and approximate rectangles in middle-saturation yellow, red, and blue. Storr seems to have aimed this selection as homage to Passlof's varied explorations of form and color in dynamic juxtaposition in her own work. An almost geological condensation of such can be seen in Joyce Robin's *UntitledSeries* (all 2018). These are small yet energetic compressions of wide spectrum color cells each ringed with piping of either analogous or complementary hues. The optical effect of this format captures a clamor of color interaction in a contrasting web of deliberate method. Andrew Spence is a painter known for his valorous discretion in reimagining



Denzil Hurley, *Glyph Within, Without and About #2*, 2016 - 2018. Oil on canvas and panel and stick, 97 x 48.5 inches. Courtesy the Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation.

positivist-formalist strategies. He does so here in a painting such as *Untitled Brown/Violet* (2018) by pushing spare lines in violet and brown towards defining the periphery of the picture plane. One can choose therefore to look upon these paintings as rational constructions of a cornered empiricist or as evident of the attenuated grace possibly achieved at the moment of classic formalist painting's hopeful transmogrification. A certain kind of magical thinking, a willed suspension of rationality, might necessarily precede painting's continued relevance as transporting vehicle. As Storr implies in his catalog essay, painting should never be considered slavishly faithful to over-rationalized formulae, "exegetical templates" (in his words), that drain the wondrous *hereness* from it.

Endnotes

1. Brian O'Doherty, *Nathalie Provosty: Slow Time* (New York: Nathalie Karg Gallery, 2018). A similar perception could be extended across the entire first floor of the show.