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Art We Saw This Winter

Tau Lewis

We, as a species, are impressed by big things: large animals, supertall buildings, supersize food. In art, however, bigger is not always better. Take Tau Lewis's current batch of sculptures in her solo debut, "Vox Populi, Vox Dei," at 52 Walker.

The Canadian-born, Brooklyn-based artist blasted onto the North American art scene half a decade ago, a hugely talented 20-something who cobbled together gritty, almost haunted sculptures and tapestries with scavenged materials. Then she was discovered: tapped by important curators and recruited by large galleries, culminating in her participation in the current Venice Biennale.

"Vox Populi, Vox Dei" follows on the heels of that heady experience and finds Lewis running a little low on ideas. Six giant heads with bombastic titles like "Mater Dei" (all works are from 2022) and "Trident" conjure masks and ferocious monsters, deities and power figures from a panoply of cultures. Materials here include repurposed leather, fur, silk, rawhide, shells and snakeskin. The works are impressive — i.e., big — but rather basic. (I always think, in these instances of "giantism," of what Roberta Smith once wrote about Zhang Huan's giant sculptures: "The main subject here is scale itself; height, volume and quantity as well as hours of human labor.")

Much ink has been spilled on the art world devouring its young. On the one hand, it's fortunate that Lewis has found success. On the other, it's bittersweet: The wild ideas and compositions Lewis created when she was relatively unknown, crafting curious objects in her studio, were better. MARTHA SCHWENDENER

Billy Childish

In the 1990s, the English writer, painter and musician Billy Childish and his band, Thee Headcoats, performed on the West Coast. These trips changed his life: He met and married his wife in the area, and now in his new show, "Spirit Guides and Other Guardians Joining Heaven and Earth," at Lehmann Maupin, he has returned to the Pacific Northwest.

These are 11 paintings with muted but expressive colors, in the manner of Edvard Munch, who was a big influence on Childish. His brushstrokes wobble like a quiet scream in a newly discovered forest. Working on linen, sketching first with charcoal before coloring with oils, he conjures an intense relationship with nature that is palpable. Even when human figures appear — usually alone — the weight of their environment seems to be squeezing them in.

Mountains, forests, lone trees, rivers and their tributaries become sites of what are perhaps forays into his own subconscious, of periods of his life that he would like to relive. Two paintings — “The Mountain That Is God” and “Moonrise Mount Tahoma” — feature the same scene: A man standing in a boat, his hat in one hand and his paddle in the other, with the mountain in the background, the river beneath him running with green cracks like a rock itself. If Childish is sharing what he remembers from his time with the landscape of the West Coast, the resulting images are majestic and peaceful, a testament to the richness of his memories, and to human memory itself. *YINKA ELUJOBA*

Regarding Kimber

The art dealer Jay Gorney has built a small invigorating group show around the work of the perennially overlooked American painter Kimber Smith (1922-1981), combining four of his works with those of seven living artists. Maybe it will finally secure permanent visibility for his art.

Smith worked with an air of buoyant, irreverent improvisation, by mixing styles and techniques, as in the bright, slightly demonic “K’s Mandolin” (1970), which combines hard and soft edges with intimations of graffiti, or by pushing painting to sketchy extremes like “June 13 (Gabrielle)” of 1979, which evokes children’s drawing. Smith is linked to second-generation Abstract Expressionism or Color Field painting. But he seems more a disrupter of both styles, part of an ongoing process of the contamination of abstract painting by real life that has been underway at least since early modernists like Miro.

All the artists here pursue contamination. Joanne Greenbaum builds up dense networks of colorful lines that should break out in cartoons but never do. Joe Fyfe collages his spare painting with a second piece of canvas and what seems to be a scrap of a vinyl sign. Eric N. Mack reduces painting to thin veils of color stretched into real space. Marina Adams stays on canvas but also stretches her forms, distorting them like textiles. Matt Connors actually makes a patterned textile the half-hidden subject of his especially Kimber-like effort. The contemporary paintings — including those by the eminent Peter Shear and Monique Mouton — make Smith seem very much of our time, and so, ahead of his. *ROBERTA SMITH*

Beryl Cook

Beryl Cook is fantastically popular in her native Britain, where her buoyant figures and warmly overstuffed scenes splash across postage stamps and tea towels, but is mostly unknown here. This determined exhibition aims to rectify the oversight, assembling 40 paintings, drawings and



Matt Connors’s “Flopist” (2022), in acrylic, oil and pencil on canvas. Credit... Matt Connors; via Ortuzar Projects and Cheim & Read

ephemera from Cook's five-decade output, from her first effort, around 1960, to her last in 2008, the year she died.

A wartime showgirl who at 40 took up painting with no formal training, Cook rendered workaday Britons in flat, voluminous splendor — cascading roly-poly retirees and fleshy call girls — a *Boterismo* for the Blackpool set. Her rowdy tableaux of greasy fish and chip shops and seaside holidays distilled a particular strain of British class sensibility, equal parts deprecating and bawdy, the un-self-conscious loosening of the stiff upper lip, or what she called “ordinary people enjoying themselves.”

Rude but just shy of lascivious (Jackie Collins was a fan), Cook's vinegary wit translates naturally to New York. Several paintings refer to her travels here, where she observed the crowds like a ribald *de Tocqueville* in America: “Bar & Barbara” (1982), zaftig matrons in swelling furs stomping by the Algonquin Hotel, is as compactly appealing as any James Thurber.

In its depiction of teeming nightlife, Cook's work channeled a cheerier version of Edward Burra's social weirdness or George Grosz's caricatures of Berliners. Her themes were adult but absent anxiety and pain, which critics dismissed as unserious, a pan which misses the point. Cook was interested in pleasure, painting it to the point of defiance. *MAX LAKIN*

Corri-Lynn Tetz

One painting shows a demure blonde in a girlish blue frock, hands clasped modestly before her. In another, a brunette in a frothy white dress, white wrap and straw hat takes a seat among daffodils. A third gives us two young women out by themselves in nature — highlands in Maine, maybe, or a hillscape on Cape Cod. Barefoot, they wear sleeveless shifts in tasteful salmon-pink and blue-gray; pink girl stares off into the distance while her companion in gray braids her hair. These paintings and nine others in the same vein by Corri-Lynn Tetz, who is based in Montreal, present the most decorous, tasteful image of girlhood you could imagine.

I find them terrifying.

In Tetz's paintings, our society's clichés of the feminine have become a bear trap waiting to grab and disable any young woman who happens upon them, as almost every young woman is bound to do.

Several of the paintings are based on figures pulled from the pages of a Laura Ashley catalog. Others look like they could be ads for the latest “prairie” styles that have recently entered (I'd say, infected) mainstream women's fashions. Their scenes are rendered in the free brushwork of the best of postwar fashion illustration, such as one rarely encounters today.

By enlarging this classic advertising style to the scale of old master statements about war and God and classical myth, Tetz turns the selling of femininity into the subject for a new kind of history painting. “The Rape of the Sabines” is hardly more chilling. *BLAKE GOPNIK*

‘Substance in a Cushion’

Galleries dedicated to truly artful design are rare as MAGA hats in New York City. They don't always stay open for long. So I was excited to climb to this fourth-floor gallery in TriBeCa, up past the well-known David Zwirner and James Cohan spaces, and discover the inspiring group show that inaugurates Jacqueline Sullivan's new gallery.

I found a wonderful mix of very new, old, and very old furniture and objects. Bold oak chairs, crafted in Yorkshire around 1700, are in happy conversation with a minimal wardrobe designed in 1974 by the Dutchman Juliaan Lampens, who made crude plywood read as refined. There's a fine dialogue between a flowery Arts and Crafts carpet, woven in England around 1895, and geometric blankets produced this year by Grace Atkinson, based in Paris.

But a more thoroughgoing marriage of old and new comes in a new project from Kristin Dickson-Okuda, one of several creators commissioned just for this show. Dickson-Okuda has taken an Arts and Crafts "Sussex" chair, produced by William Morris in the 1870s, and, magpie-like, added black ribbons to its sides and clear vinyl squares to its arms and even hand-knit white cozies around its legs. Her additions feel completely contemporary, but also completely respectful of the vintage objects they adorn and update.

In design, a mix of old and new often feels like a showy accumulation of treasures, ignoring what each piece once meant. Sullivan, with degrees in both poetry and design history, turns anachronism into a creative force. *BLAKE GOPNIK*

Eva Beresin

Brutality and tenderness commingle in the Hungarian artist Eva Beresin's new paintings in her show "Aktenkundig (On Record)," which depict versions of herself and her family in scenes that clamor with both visual and emotional intensity. Rendered in a childlike hand and juicy palette that belies their gravity, Beresin's pictures can feel fantastical, less surreal than the way anxieties tend to fall over one another in dreams, letting the mind sort them out, or not. Beresin often depicts herself naked, tumbling through space, à la Chagall. Soldiers are as likely to intrude as garden gnomes, ghosts are given equal status with art-historical allusions. Gloopy 3D-printed sculptures of melted dogs and turtles, as though escaped from the picture plane, amplify the allegorical mood.

Beresin's current mode of figurative painting follows from discovering the diary her mother wrote after her liberation from Auschwitz. Despite that subject matter, or perhaps because of it, Beresin's canvases brim with caustic humor ("Familiarity," in which a woman surveys her aging body as cosmonauts leer from the corner), indebted to but not weighed down by the freight of memory.

Beresin works fast, applying paint to canvas on the floor without any intermediary sketching. (Tread marks from her shoes are often visible, like a faint map, revealing the traces of her movements.) Her fleshy, muddy figures are often barely legible, sometimes heaped into clots of roughly defined bodies, which suggest mass graves and other attendant horrors of the camps, an inherited trauma that reverberates. Her furious strokes read as impatience, but also freedom. *MAX LAKIN*