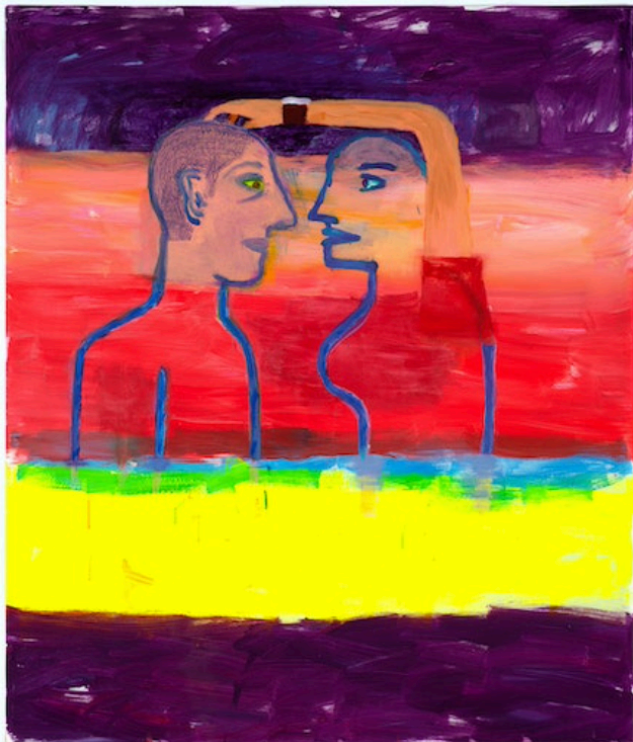


BROOKLYN RAIL

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Painting the Essential

Chris Martin has brought together fifteen painters, including himself, that are united by time—the eighties—and place—downtown Manhattan and Brooklyn—but resolutely different in style. This is a marvelous show that summarizes the American artistic sensibility of our times: a house decidedly divided against itself. This American spirit has, unfortunately, defined itself mostly by negation, by being absolutely and unambiguously against "something," but never entirely sure of what might be preferable. This explains why we long for the idea (if not the reality) of the avant-garde: we have no academy, royal or otherwise, so we have no inherently conservative standards to fight against. Now, we simply fight among ourselves. When we find artists included in this show complaining about the strictures of a Minimalism they absorbed in art school—much as an earlier generation "rebelled" against Clement Greenberg—we realize, again in a particularly American way, that we need a strawman: "I'm not that, I hate that." Either we end up becoming just what we most vocally despise or, like several of the artists Chris Martin includes here, we acquire multiple artistic personalities.



Katherine Bradford, *Head Touch*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas.

The artists Martin includes here fall into two distinct age groups: those born in the forties and those born in the fifties. The only outlier is Ron Gorchov (b.1930) who proves that an artist of an earlier generation did not have to be an enemy, and could indeed be a mentor. The two Gorchov works included here are in his signature shield style: *Biltmore* is from 1980 and *Libitina* is from 2017. The thirty-seven-year distance between them confirms that Gorchov follows an ancient artistic dictum—find your style and stick with it—discarded by most of the other artists in the show, who move from style to style as if they were playing whack-a-mole.

Take the two women from the born-in-the-forties group: Joyce Pensato and Katherine Bradford. Pensato only found her artistic self in the nineties, when she finally purged color out of her work and embraced the expressionistic cartoon mode that has made her famous.

Untitled (Bart Simpson) (1994), a 41 by 29 1/8 inch enamel on paper, does exactly what Pensato intends it to do, transforming a seemingly innocent artifact of popular culture into the grotesque, simultaneously terrifying us and making us laugh. Bradford too had to abandon her abstract baggage and embrace a combination of figuration and color experiment. Bradford's *Head Touch* (2019) summarizes that esthetic: a couple, male and female, are imposed on horizontal swaths of bright acrylic. In an almost Egyptian pose, the woman rests her palm on the man's head. Is she saying, "I'm just as tall as you!" or "My how you've grown!"? There are myriad narratives, humorous and political, implied in this painting, which also evokes Surrealist juxtapositions.

That combination of the serious and the playful reappears in Thomas Nozkowski's *Untitled (6-53)* (1988), an oil in the 16 by 20 inch format the artist has never abandoned. We think, correctly, of Nozkowski as an abstractionist who incorporated biomorphic elements in his work. But here he makes a visual pun that harkens back to cartoons. At the center of the canvas is a figure that combines a cat with a house—a "house-cat." It's funny, but at the same time it has a whiff of the ominous. Humor also crops up, rather unexpectedly, in Jonathan Lasker's *Untitled (S-212)* (2018), a diminutive 6 by 8 inch oil and pigment marker on paper. Lasker's career since his brief time at CalArts in 1977 has been, if not a justification of painting, then a justification of paint itself, paint in its materiality, not simply color. *Untitled (S-212)* is an ironic self-portrait. Occupying the upper register of the picture is Lasker's signature, below are three sculptural images scrawled in his squiggly style. "I paint therefore I am," would be an appropriate title.

When we get to the fifties group, sex raises its menacing and funny head. It's only fitting that Marina Adams should reiterate the title of Bobby Darrin's 1958 smash hit in her 2014 *Dream Lover 4*, a 40 by 35 inch acrylic on linen. Singing in his androgynous quasi-falsetto, Darrin longs for "a girl to call my own" in a mad lover's narcissistic lust for possession—most likely of himself—which Adams turns into an erotic geometry. Her canvas divides between vaguely triangular shapes that intersect at dead center, where a female sex materializes. Adams accomplishes with her blurred figures what Courbet accomplishes with his *Woman with a Parrot* (1869)—the female genitals are the star of the show—but she does it through suggestion, reminding us that more than truth is in the eye of the beholder.

If we tried to define Amy Sillman on the basis of her superb *Untitled* (2019), a 40 by 25 inch acrylic, oil stick and ink on paper, we would be missing the point, because Sillman, while an extraordinary abstract painter, is also a socially committed satirist. She embodies the idea that American artists need to oppose something—often themselves—but she does so in an open-ended, non-dialectical way. Instead of following, say, Philip Guston's model and moving from abstraction to figuration in linear fashion, Sillman works productively in both modes simultaneously. She passes (with flying colors) F. Scott Fitzgerald's test of a first-rate intelligence: "the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."

Chris Martin's own contribution to this survey constitutes a metaphor both for his career and for the idea that one artist can be many artists. *Trinidad Afternoon* (2019) is a large 77 by 88 inch canvas covered with oil, acrylic, collage, and glitter. This composite of elements echoes the many lives of Chris Martin—artist, museum guard, art therapist during the AIDS crisis. Just as his life is made up of disparate pieces, his work reflects the attitude of the

bricoleur, picking up this and that, setting it aside, then incorporating it into an artwork in an astonishing way. So here we begin with landscape and its geometric affinities, bands of bright color shimmering in the background just on the border between abstraction and figuration. Then in the foreground four tree-like objects, standing bare. Beauty and death, a sobering reminder of how fragile both art and artists can be.