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At the Galleries

The past season's high points included modernist masters, contemporary women painters, a seldom-seen sculptor, and a reunion, after four centuries, of Renaissance masterworks, once in the same collection. Among the most engaging shows in a busy season, "Vertigo of Color: Matisse, Derain, and the Origins of Fauvism," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, brought together a selection of the vibrant, experimental works the two painters made in the Mediterranean fishing village Collioure, near the Spanish border, during nine weeks of feverish effort in 1905. Organized by the Met's Dita Amory and Ann Dumas of the Museum of Fine Arts Houston (the show's next stop), the revealing show focused, like the superb "Manet/Degas," which fortuitously overlapped at the Metropolitan, on a conversation between painters, on cross-fertilization, similarities and differences. That conversation took place when the 24 year-old André Derain traveled to the Catalanspeaking little port in response to an invitation from his older friend Henri Matisse, who, apparently made nervous by the transformation of his palette in response to the intense seaside light of Collioure, wanted to exchange ideas with a fellow artist. The images resulting from their weeks of work together ranged from the busy fishing port, to the town buildings, to unspoiled coves, and the nearby woods. Mme. Matisse. posed for both men. They painted portraits of one another, Matisse's head of Derain rapidly and casually brushed, Derain's of Matisse, with a pipe, thickly and deliberately stroked. Derain painted Mme. Matisse in a blue and white kimono and drew his friend painting his wife, in the kimono, outdoors, by the sea. Matisse drew his wife, with urgent strokes, in the kimono, holding a fan.

Derain, working feverishly, produced an ample group of canvases, some fairly large and obviously the result of intense effort, such as the slightly congested *Fishing Boats, Collioure* (1905, Metropolitan Museum of Art), others less labored and full of light, such as the fresh, energetic *Sailboats at Collioure* (1905, Private Collection) with its ample zones of unpainted canvas. Matisse, whose declared aim was to produce works that could be source material for future paintings, drew, made watercolors, and small, spontaneous canvases. The watercolors were a delightful surprise, especially one of a row of boats against the sea, their vertical masts separating free-floating patches of blue and green water, contradicted by staccato horizontal touches of pink and deep blue that suggest a brilliantly sunlit distance. We squinted against the implied dazzle of the sun on water.

In some works, we watched Derain using the white of the primed canvas to heighten detached strokes of saturated color, while in others, a gray ground unified and harmonized staccato patches. We could recognize the landscape setting of Matisse's *Le bonheur de vivre* (1905–1906, Barnes Foundation) in a trio of small, vibrant studies and savor his extraordinary evocation of blinding seaside light and summer heat in his radiant *Open Window, Collioure* (1905, National Gallery, Washington, DC) with its dotted vines and flower pots on the balcony, and tossing boats in the harbor, all hot pinks, deep greens and flickers of orange. It can be argued that Derain painted some of his most potent work in Collioure, but he never returned. Matisse found the place stimulating (and affordable, an important consideration at the time)

and made several other working sojourns, attested to by the Met's *Young Sailor II* (1906), perched on a chair against a pink background, and a forthright, declarative landscape made in 1907. Moving through "Vertigo of Color," we felt we were witnessing a complete rethinking of what a painting could be, at the same time that we longed for a trip to the South of France. Cornelia Foss's exhibition, as a Century Master, at The Century Association, offered another approach to landscape, no less concentrated but different in mood than that of "Vertigo of Color," along with some vigorous still lifes. The recent paintings on view were proof that at 92, Foss is making some of the strongest, most uninhibited works of her long career. Was it the proverbial freedom of long-lived artists, born of experience and indifference to the opinion of others that art historians call "late style," or was it simply an inevitable progression? However we chose to categorize them, the works in the exhibition were consistently powerful. Foss's luminous beachside views have long been a known quantity, but the show was full of the unexpected. A pitcher of flowers in a memorable still life threatened to dissolve into an explosion of blue and yellow. The burning of Notre-Dame became an urgently stroked mass of hot yellow-orange, partly veiled by jagged silhouettes. A large confrontational, rather dark painting alluding to the Holocaust slowly revealed mysterious figures and flushes of deep color. And another large canvas, a loosely knit fabric of broadly brushed greens, with an occasional flash of red, turned out to have something to do with the story of Little Red Riding Hood, although those slashing, pulsing strokes of green required no justification. The energy and experimentation of the works at The Century Association made me look forward more than ever to Foss's next show.

Skarstedt Gallery offered a welcome chance to see sculptures by the German-born, Swiss-resident Hans Josephsohn (1920–2012). While he is well known in Europe, with important works on permanent view in several institutions, and was featured in the 2013 Biennale di Venezia, Josephsohn's work is seldom exhibited here. Yet even in Europe, he is seen as an "artist's artist," something of a cult figure and possibly an acquired taste. Josephsohn's blunt, obsessively worked heads and figures are deliberately uningratiating. The most compelling of the mysterious, oversized heads at Skarstedt threatened to revert to being primordial lumps. At more than four feet high, the elusive flattened ovals, poised on thick necks, were vaguely menacing. It was surprise to learn that some were portraits, with the name of the subject added to the label "Untitled," since they read more as abstract improvisations on what the critic Michael Fried would call "headness" than as responses to specific individuals. It's as though Josephsohn recognized the association with a human head provoked by a generous, vaguely oval mass of plaster or clay and subtly emphasized that likeness, playing with proportions and, in the best works, our memory of features, in general. The more specific detail he adds—roughly pinched noses and smudged, minimally indented eyes, for example—the less potent the heads seem to be. Ambiguity is Josephsohn's strong suit.

The exhibition's two large reclining figures, their dull, dark, agitated surfaces seeming to contradict the fact that they were cast in brass, were like ancient mountain ranges, eroded by time. At Skarstedt, it was hard to see them from all sides, but it was possible to compare his insistence on a particular pose and his alteration of its essential elements. Just as Matisse returned, in both paintings and sculptures, to nudes in a reclining pose loosely inspired by Michelangelo's *Dawn*, in the Medici Chapel, Josephsohn rings changes on an extended figure stretched out on her right side, head propped up, one leg over the other, left arm draped across the body. One form melts into another or, conversely, differentiates itself, becoming almost independent of anatomical connotations. A hip rises gently in one version and flattens in another. We become more fascinated by the progression of bulges and lumps along the length of the figure as an abstract sequence than we are by their reference to body parts. The figure all but transforms into landscape. The limited selection of works included, of necessity, in the show was slightly frustrating, but also helpful, since Josephsohn's repeated themes are themselves limited. It takes concentration to see the conceptual variations among them. Let's

hope Skarstedt organizes more exhibitions of his work so that we can become connoisseurs of nuance.

At Canada, “Katherine Bradford: Arms and the Sea” brought together paintings, mostly large, made in 2022 and 2023. A few were fairly tightly constructed, with simplified, intensely colored figures coalescing into geometric masses, a configuration that Bradford has explored in various ways in recent years in paintings about carrying, embracing, or simply pressing together. The exhibition’s recent pictures of this type, such as *Women Under the Stars* (2022) or the *Family Reunion* (2022) provided continuity with previous work. Good as they were, I was more engaged by her looser, even more recent compositions, such as the large, horizontal *In the Lake* (2023) with its floating figures stretching across two canvases, in a brushy expanse of Prussian blue. In works such as *In the Lake*, Bradford is putting on paint with even more impassioned energy than before, setting up an invigorating tension between the economically rendered, utterly convincing men and women in their pink and orange bathing suits and the forthright, transparent, oversized brushmarks that assert the flatness and extent of the canvas. (The difference between males and females, in Bradford’s paintings, is never a paramount issue but usually results from how we interpret the minimally indicated clothing.) Here, the central female figure, in pink, seems seated on the water. Is there an invisible floating support? She spreads her arms, linking the two parts of the painting. A shadow of a foot beneath her adds complexity to the space. A pair of legs in orange trunks dangling at the top of the canvas made me think about the pink-red legs visible at the top of Edouard Manet’s crowd of revelers, *Masked Ball at the Opera* (1873, National Gallery, Washington, DC). I’m sure Bradford knows the painting. Whether she was thinking about it in connection with *In the Lake* is another matter.

The floating figure in the blue expanse beneath the summarily rendered two-story white building in *Under My House* (2022) made the pared-down picture the eeriest in the show. The possibility of a sinister reading of this unyielding painting intensified the charge of its lush blue purples, while suggestive imagery entered into a tug of war with broad, assertive brushstrokes. A few loosely, seemingly rapidly brushed small paintings, Bradford’s preferred size, years ago, were as poetic and elusive as the best of the large paintings. The motifs ranged from a slim diver against a dark sky to two figures in bed, under a coverlet made of an emphatic stroke. Bradford has said that she thinks of herself as an abstract painter. She constructs her paintings with firm planes of color that are somehow brought to life so that we read them as figures. For all their generous scale and apparent simplifications, which make Bradford’s recent works eloquent from a distance, their rich orchestrations of surface, full-throttle color, and unpredictable imagery require (and reward) extended close attention. They may be Bradford’s most complex paintings to date.

I confess I’ve found myself baffled by the tidal wave of enthusiasm for Dana Schutz’s exhibition, “Jupiter’s Lottery” at David Zwirner Gallery, in Chelsea. There are always moments in her paintings when touch and image work together to be expressive and satisfying, but I never feel engaged by the whole. And like many works exhibited in the vast spaces of prestigious galleries like Zwirner, Schutz’s current paintings usually seem to be as big as they are only because of the size of available walls, rather than for compelling aesthetic reasons. (The less said about the sculpture the better.) It may indicate a fatal flaw in my perception, but I simply don’t understand Schutz’s reliance on overscaled, aggressively distorted, cartoonish images. Her admiration for Philip Guston is palpable, and there are other art historical allusions, throughout—does that miscellany of bones and other detritus at the bottom of the bombastic, enormous *The Gathering* (2023) have anything to do with the scattered limbs and skeletons outside the dragon’s lair in paintings of St. George? But Schutz’s self-conscious grotesqueries don’t make sense to me. There’s a sense (as there is in much of Lucian Freud’s work) of posturing as transgressive and rude for the sake of attracting attention. Schutz could make paintings just as ferocious (and less predictable), with less foot stamping, if she trusted her ability to put on paint, orchestrate color, and, yes, invent narratives.

Perhaps the most luxurious event of the past season was the reunion, after about 400 years, of two Venetian Renaissance masterpieces, Giorgione's *The Three Philosophers* (c. 1508-09, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) and Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert* (c. 1475-80, The Frick Collection, New York.) Formerly installed in the palazzo of the Venetian aristocrat Taddeo Contarini and recorded as being there in 1525 by the Venetian art collector Marcantonio Michiel, the two long separated works are now once again sharing the same space in Frick Madison. This extraordinary opportunity to study the paintings, which together provide an intense, capsule introduction to Venetian painting, will last until February 4, 2024, a month before Frick Madison closes in preparation for the return to the mansion on 70th Street. It's a kind of last hurrah for The Frick Collection in its temporary modernist home, perhaps intended to console us for the loss of the pleasure of seeing familiar works in new relationships, at eye level, without furniture or other distractions between us and the paintings. (That's not to say that it won't be enlightening to see the collection back in the refurbished mansion. But.)

Seeing the two splendid paintings installed near each other makes us consider each of them freshly. As the exhibition's curator, the Frick's Xavier F. Salomon, has pointed out, they are composed in similar ways, both with landscapes that contrast caves and rocks with open views, both with their protagonists in the right foreground. The proximity makes us more aware than ever of the enchanting detail of Bellini's painting, the lovingly catalogued wealth of flora and fauna that parallels the saint's omnivorous appetite for the life around him. We concentrate on the suave modeling, geometric heft, and subtle light of *The Three Philosophers*, wonder about the men's exotic costumes, ponder the mysterious title—attached to it by Michiel, in his list and wander into the luminous distances. We think about the ways Giorgione's conception fulfills the implications of Bellini's, painted at least two decades earlier. And more. The pairing at Frick Madison is accompanied by a handsome, well-illustrated book by Salomon, Bellini and Giorgione in the House of Taddeo Contarini, an illuminating, modest volume that rehearses current scholarship about the history of the two works and their former owner. Many questions about these celebrated, much studied paintings are addressed and answered, but many, we learn, remain unanswered and perhaps unanswerable. It's possible, for example, that it's not only the title of *The Three Philosophers* that has puzzled and continues to puzzle. Even the authorship of the painting may be in doubt, as it is with many works by the short-lived, elusive Giorgio da Castelfranco, known as Giorgione. It doesn't make *The Three Philosophers*—or whoever they may be—any less compelling, but it's something else to think about when we take advantage of the amazing opportunity to see the two Venetian masterworks together at Frick Madison.