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ART REVIEW

New Sparkle for an Abstract Ensemble

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SARATOGA SPRINGS, N.Y. — In the echo chamber that is the New York art world, where one voice can give the illusion of being many, the crusading cry of late is “We need more painting!” As if there were a dearth. Is there? Walk through any of the city’s art museums, and what do you see? Paintings everywhere. Visit contemporary galleries all over town, and what do you find? They’re painting packed. But still the cry goes on.



“The Jewel Thief”: Top row, from left, Joan Snyder’s “And Always Searching for Beauty,” Stanley Whitney’s “Tango” and Michael Lazarus’s “Again” at the Tang Museum.



A hanging chandelier, “Hybrid” (2009), by Virgil Marti and a wall installation, “Romancing the Rock” (2010), by Elana Herzog.

This is especially puzzling because much of the plenteous new work, while expertly schooled, looks unadventurous, like so many slightly rearranged cover versions of hit styles from the past: Geometric Abstraction, Surrealism, Hallmark Cards Expressionism, etc. Maybe we're wrong to expect more. Maybe that's all that painting, in New York at least now, can yield.

Or maybe we have a display problem. Exhibitions, which are intensely calculated events, can make powerful arguments for art. Ambitious, imaginatively conceived group shows in particular can significantly raise the interest level of even ordinary material and make the better than ordinary soar.

Such exhibitions are always hard to find, but there's one on view now at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College here in upstate New York. Consisting mostly of paintings, and with work by 60 artists, it's called "The Jewel Thief." Piece by piece it's a modest affair, but as an ensemble it's vibrant. It makes even minimally interesting components feel vivacious.

Abstraction is the show's unifying principle, but that covers a wide swath, and sets up some useful confusions. Painting dominates. Some of it is old (a 1950s Joan Mitchell, a 1970s Nicholas Krushenick), but most is from the last 10 years, and by artists of different generations. (Joan Snyder was born in 1940, Francesca DiMattio in 1981.) Stylistically the work is all over the map, and generally speaking innovation isn't the point. Nuance is.

That nuance extends to how forms are defined. There are, for example, drawings in the show that look like painting, like a beautiful puff-of-smoke graphite piece by Jerry Phillips, and painting, like Richard Woods's faux-wood floorboards, that is basically tinted drawing.

More surprisingly, there's sculpture that's distinctly painterly and draftsmanly. A ceramic piece by Kathy Butterly, covered with flowing and dripping glazes, is a knot of expressionistic color and gesture. The surface of a Styrofoam bench by James Hyde incorporates photographic details of a Stuart Davis painting. Three tall, thin, black wooden sculptures by Rico Gatson, set high on a balcony, read like ink strokes against a white wall.

Architecture plays a role in this game of identity switching. White cubes of different sizes are scattered around the Tang's main gallery. The smaller ones serve as straightforward pedestals for sculptures like Ms. Butterly's, but the larger ones are multipurpose. They function as space dividers, as walls for hanging paintings and, when covered with a hand-painted mural like [Jim Hodges](#)'s camouflage-patterned "Oh Great Terrain," as art objects.

In this boundary-free environment no surface is pure, no form is sacrosanct. Thin lines of ripped fabric in a wall piece by Elana Herzog appear to be burning, like corrosive acid, in the cube they're stapled to. And here and there art piles up on top of other art. In one case a small pencil drawing by the amazing Gary Batty — he's the Michelangelo of near-microscopic crosshatching — is hung directly on a panel covered with an assertively patterned design in ink by Victoria Palermo.

Such doublings up point out a major strategy, and strength, of the show, organized by the Tang curator Ian Berry and the sculptor Jessica Stockholder. Throughout the installation, objects are placed in what promises to be clashing and undermining proximity, without any damage occurring. To the contrary, almost everything picks up something useful, often something it lacks — weirdness, beauty, weight, humility — from being in mixed company.

Ms. Stockholder's sculpture has always operated within this dynamic, and does in two pieces she contributes to the exhibition. The smaller of them, "Chandelier of Sand and Oil," an assemblage of electrical cords, fluorescent bulbs, drinking glasses and sea shells suspended from a thick metal chain, succinctly embodies her signature mix of found material, constructed form, and painterly color.

But it is her second and larger piece, called "The Jewel Thief," that most fully expands on the show's overarching aesthetic, an aesthetic that puts a premium on formal diversity and interdependence, and that questions the sovereign value assigned to the stand-alone art object in an object-glutted world. Ms. Stockholder's piece consists of several wooden and steel platforms that suggest small stages or disassembled bleachers. They're clearly made for standing and sitting — a version of the piece was installed as an outdoor sculpture in Manhattan in 2009 — though one platform also serves as an outsize shelf for displaying two diminutive sculptures by Richard Rezac. One is a cluster of tubular maple uprights shaped like candles or organ pipes; the other, a kind of aluminum tray holding red and blue polyurethane cylinders that could be chess pieces or gemstones.

Above this platform hang jewel-like paintings in salon-style profusion: glowing grids of orange and red by Stanley Whitney; a shower of blossoms by Ms. Snyder; a tanka-type piece by Michael Lazarus with a citrus-and-dried-blood palette and little faces with cut-out eyes. One artist, Roy Dowell, is represented by several works: a half-dozen loquacious paint-pencil-and-collage pieces that dress Juan Gris in floral-print slip-cover fabrics and that capture the show's high-low, serious-kidding, pretty-ugly soul.

Ordinarily I don't find Mr. Dowell's art all that gripping; there's something generic about its slightly updated modernism. I feel the same about several other painters in the show who, to my eye, rejigger old models without adding much to them. But within the exhibition environment cooked up by Mr. Berry and Ms. Stockholder everybody takes on some sparkle, like guests mingling at a good party.

Mr. Dowell's floral patterns, for instance, link up with and complement Mr. Hyde's vinyl-covered Stuart Davis sofa: art museum meets suburban living room. And their work is gently lifted up — made more complex and joyous — by its connection to the spidery Christmas-lights chandelier by Virgil Marti hanging from the gallery ceiling, a marriage of grace and kitsch in excelsis.

Mr. Marti titles his work "Hybrid." And that is, of course, what the Tang show is, though a hybrid so carefully shaped and thought through that it becomes something more. It's essentially a big piece of Conceptual Art, one that messes with given definitions of painting, drawing, sculpture and architecture, and by doing so breaks those forms open. At the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan, a smart exhibition called "On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century" is doing much the same thing by recasting modern and contemporary drawing as a trans-disciplinary phenomenon encompassing painting, sculpture and performance.

Such shows, whatever flaws they may have in execution, make art history, past and present, bigger and richer. They bring more guests — some still strangers — to the table. And they assure that art in its many forms is productively refreshed and promoted. Given all of that, a dogged push for painting-only-painting, as if painting were the only art that's really art, seems like an unnecessary, and deeply conservative crusade.

THE JEWEL THIEF

WHEN AND WHERE Through Feb. 27; Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Skidmore College, 815 North Broadway, Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

MORE INFO (518) 580-8080, tang.skidmore.edu.