The New York Times

GALLERIES OF NEW YORK: FIVE ARTISTS

Distinct Prisms in an Ever-Shifting Kaleidoscope

Clare Grill is showing contemplative abstract paintings at Zieher Smith & Horton.
Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

By William Grimes

April 16, 2015

With female artists more visible than ever, here are five who have put their stamp on the current gallery moment. They work in studios from Sunnyside to Crown Heights to Paris, in paint, porcelain and pixels.

Clare Grill

When Clare Grill started painting in college, she ran into a problem. Her school, the University of St. Thomas, in St. Paul, Minn., did not have an art department. She signed up for courses at the College of St. Catherine nearby. By her senior year, she was the only student to enroll in advanced painting.

She did receive encouragement. “When I graduated, my art adviser said, ‘You should get your work in coffee shops,’ ” said Ms. Grill, interviewed in her studio in Sunnyside, Queens. “I thought, ‘Yeah, I could do that.’ ”

New York beckoned. On Ms. Grill’s first day in painting class at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, her teacher told her to check out the galleries in Chelsea. “I had never heard of Chelsea,” she said. “I didn’t know what she was talking about.” She figured it out. Zieher Smith & Horton in Chelsea is now showing nine of her contemplative abstract paintings, medium-scale works with floaty, interwoven patterns, shapes and marks in palettes that range from misty pale greens and lemon yellows to pulsing reds.

Ms. Grill, who grew up in Western Springs, Ill., outside Chicago, worked her way toward abstraction gradually. In retrospect, this evolution looks like a deliberate series of steps. Ms. Grill describes it as a protracted struggle. “I was overthinking everything,” she said, describing one low point. “I felt kind of paralyzed.”

She started out as a figurative painter, working from photographs. Art by Mamma Andersson and Peter Doig helped redefine her relationship to her source material, which she began relying on for mood rather than imagery.

“I was still looking at photographs, but I started to let what was happening on the surface of the painting determine what the final painting would be,” Ms. Grill said. “I let the little decisions become the main thing. The painting still had an available logic, but not anything that you could explain. The story started to fade.” Her current paintings allude to early American sampler embroidery, with hints at leaf forms and letters.

Until recently, Ms. Grill painted on small canvases, but in 2014 she was given a solo show in a large Los Angeles gallery, forcing her to go bigger. The works in her current exhibition are about four feet by five feet. She lays out her canvases on a big table and scoots around them on a rolling chair, working small sections at a time

She is fond of an expression that a friend once used: You know a painting is a painting when it has a face and looks back at you. She has come up with her own version. “It’s like an important conversation,” she said. “A conversation you don’t forget.”

Jamie Isenstein is known for revealing herself, if only in parts. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Jamie Isenstein

Presence and absence weave their way through Jamie Isenstein's work. Absence more than presence, in the case of her show "Para Drama," at the Andrew Kreps Gallery in Chelsea. The installation, a constellation of "performance sculptures" evoking the paranormal, has as its centerpiece "Mechanical Bed," a neatly made twin bed whose quilted blue cover and top sheet, manipulated by an invisible hand, peel downward, as if a ghost were arising from slumber. The same unseen hand then remakes the bed. The entire process takes about 40 minutes.

Normally, Ms. Isenstein reveals herself, if only in parts. In "Arm Chair" (2006), her limbs protruded from a green chair, forming its front legs and arms. In "Rug Rug Rug Rug Rug" (2009), her arms and legs stuck out from underneath a three-rug overlay — wolf, sheep and bear — with an Oriental rug on the floor.

In one of Ms. Isenstein's earlier works, "Magic Fingers," a gilded oval picture frame with an opening allowed her to thrust her hand into the frame, where it struck a graceful pose, in the manner of a tableau vivant.

A couple bought the piece and installed it in their home. Ms. Isenstein would turn up on special occasions — say, a dinner party — and put her hand in the frame. Then, pushing the logic of the piece to its natural conclusion, she began visiting the home when the owners were away. "I think of it as sculpture in which I use my body as a ready-made," she said in an interview. "Performances require an audience, but sculptures exist all the time."

She eventually dropped the experiment. "They had a housekeeper who let me in, and she was really confused," she said.

Ms. Isenstein studied art at Reed College in Portland, Ore., her hometown, and gravitated early on to a blend of performance art, installation art and body art, to which she applied a Surrealist, witty spin in the manner of Magritte. "What I'm doing now is not that different from what I was doing in college," she said.

After moving to New York, she became an assistant at the Andrew Kreps Gallery, a more orthodox job than her stint in Portland painting prosthetic teeth. “I was paid by the tooth,” she said. After earning an M.F.A. at Columbia in 2004, she began showing in New York, Los Angeles and Berlin. Wherever the work was, she was, or at least part of her: a foot, a hand, an arm or a leg.

Even during breaks, Ms. Isenstein’s presence is implicit in a “Will Return” clock-sign hanging from the sculpture. The artist is out. But the artist will be in.

Shirley Jaffe in her studio on the Left Bank in Paris. Nicola Lo Calzo for The New York Times

Shirley Jaffe

At 91, Shirley Jaffe feels she might be slacking off a little. She is not happy about that.

“I have done a lot of work,” she said, speaking by phone from her apartment and studio near the Sorbonne in Paris, reflecting on more than a half-century at the easel. “I do work practically every day now, but a lot less, which disturbs me. But I do try to keep to a rhythm of doing at least something every day.”

There are numerous somethings in her show at Tibor de Nagy Gallery in Manhattan: four oil paintings, including one completed this year, and 18 works on paper from the past six years. The paintings are done in a geometric abstract style that Ms. Jaffe adopted in the late 1960s, abandoning the gestural brushwork with which she began her career in the early 1950s. The works on paper, in Flashe vinyl paint, show a looser hand but the same Matisse-esque brilliance of color as in her paintings.

She has worked in both formats simultaneously for most of her career. “Every now and then I have a rapid idea and I start doing something on paper,” she said. “The oil paintings force me to have a conclusion that is more tight and fixed. Paper is closer to free brushwork. I go as far as I can, but I don’t push the idea as much as I do in oil.” The paintings, she said, have a different goal: “multiple exactnesses.”

Ms. Jaffe, a native of Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, set sail for Paris in 1949 after earning an art degree from Cooper Union. She did not much care for that city, but her husband did. She stayed on even after they divorced in 1961. “I found Paris very provincial,” she said. “And it still is. But I have been able to live and to show.”

She formed part of an artistic circle that included the Americans Sam Francis, Norman Bluhm and Joan Mitchell and the Canadian Jean-Paul Riopelle. Acceptance was slow to come on both sides of the Atlantic. After she embraced geometric abstraction, the French critics disowned her for decades. Not until 1990 did she have her first solo show in New York, at the Holly Solomon Gallery. Her work is now in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Pompidou Center in Paris.

“I haven’t demanded very much,” Ms. Jaffe said. “Just to produce.”

Hito Steyerl

Hokusai’s wave, crashing in sparkling pixels, shares a giant video screen with images of martial arts fighters. A Hellfire missile turns out to be first cousin to a bank lobby designed by Frank Gehry. An insurgent with an AK-47 finds common cause with the contestants on “American Idol.”

In her documentary videos, installations and multimedia talks, the German artist Hito Steyerl splices opposites, forges unlikely conceptual alliances and creates conundrums. “I like the combination of two different ideas that connect at an unexpected level,” she said in a recent telephone interview from Berlin, where she lives and is finishing a video installation for the Venice Biennale in May.

Hito Steyerl likes combining ideas that connect unexpectedly.
Roland Weihrauch/European Press Agency

Called “Factory of the Sun,” it tells two stories simultaneously. The first is a documentary account of a couple, one a YouTube dancer, the other a video game programmer. The second is the fictional tale of a video game in which players must escape an information dictatorship where every human emotion turns into sunlight. “It’s funny and dark,” Ms. Steyerl said. “It’s also a musical.”

Ms. Steyerl's work is having a comprehensive showing at both locations of Artists Space, in SoHo and TriBeCa. The big-bang production, at the main gallery in SoHo, is "Liquidity Inc.," which gives free play to Ms. Steyer's thoughts on water as a metaphor for the movement of capital through international markets, or the fluid motions of martial artists.

In other video works, Ms. Steyerl delivers her version of a TED talk. As projected images light up around her, she describes a "Matrix"-like hall of mirrors in which power flows to the lords of digital media, information technology is a tool of oppression and arms manufacturers strike unholy alliances with corrupt political elites.

Ms. Steyerl grew up in Munich and studied cinematography and documentary filmmaking with Shohei Imamura at the Institute of the Moving Image in Tokyo. "It was the last stronghold of Japanese lefties from the '70s," Ms. Steyerl said. "People were running around in berets."

After working with the German director Wim Wenders on "Until the End of the World" (1991) and "Faraway, So Close" (1993), she did postgraduate work in philosophy at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. She became a fixture on the European art-festival circuit with "November" (2004), about a never-completed feminist martial-arts film she tried to make with a teenage friend, and "In Free Fall" (2010), which uses an airplane junkyard in the Mojave Desert to parse the circulation of cultural commodities.

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Simone Leigh's ceramic and multimedia sculptures are on view at Tilton Gallery. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Simone Leigh

Simone Leigh was happily taking courses in philosophy and cultural studies at Earlham College in Richmond, Ind., when she made a fatal error. She began making ceramics.

This was not part of the plan. “I tried not to be an artist for a really long time,” she said in an interview at Tilton Gallery, the site of her current show, “Moulting.” “But at a certain point I realized I was not going to stop doing it.”

The studies did not go to waste. Her sculptures, videos, installations and performances draw on her reading in feminist theory, anthropology, postcolonial theory and the politics of race and identity. “It wouldn’t be interesting to me to make the work if I only had a formal interest,” she said. “The artwork is more about the theory part than the materials.”

The materials are arresting. “Moulting” includes several of her signature shapes and forms, notably the plantains and cowrie shells that allude to her Caribbean heritage, the tiny blue porcelain rosebuds that she arranges into African hairstyles and the giant hoop-skirt armatures that invoke not only the antebellum South but also the Herero tribe of southern Africa, which adopted the style, and Cameroonian huts.

Ms. Leigh, who lives and works in Brooklyn, grew up in Chicago, with Jamaican parents. After graduating from Earlham, she held on to the idea of becoming a social worker, but an internship at the National Museum of African Art, part of the Smithsonian Institution, pulled her back into the world of ceramics, as did a stint near Charlottesville, Va., where she lived in a yurt and learned how to use a Japanese wood-fired anagama kiln. Art took over.

Her first important show, scheduled to open on Sept. 13, 2001, at the Rush Arts Gallery in Manhattan, was postponed and then ignored after the World Trade Center attack. “I had worked really hard for that show, I had just gone through a divorce, and I didn’t know how to pick up the pieces after that,” she said.

She rebounded with an exhibition at Momenta Art in Brooklyn in 2005, which included “White Teeth.” The work, five panels of sharpened porcelain teeth, honored the memory of Ota Benga, a Congolese pygmy with pointed teeth who was put on display at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition and the Bronx Zoo. She has exhibited steadily ever since.

This summer, at the Denniston Hill Art Colony in Woodridge, N.Y., she plans to reimagine the 1964 Japanese film “Woman in the Dunes” as a large-scale installation, replacing the male lead with a woman.

“It may not even work,” Ms. Leigh said. “But I’m O.K. with it when my work fails. When you’re a ceramist — .” She stopped, and burst out laughing.