

rachel uffner

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Seeing Enough Shows on the LES

by Stephen Truax on November 8, 2010



A typical Lower East Side view (image via lushlifeles.com)

A generic survey of New York's Lower East Side galleries, perused at random on the first week of November, 2010, including observations from a viewer completely outside the art world.

Jerry Saltz often ridicules artists for not going to see enough shows; that they have several cookie-cutter reasons: too busy, not wanting to overexpose themselves in the scene, fear of polluting their unique and singular artistic vision, etc.

Well, I set the fear of contaminating my art aside and I went around the New York City's Lower East Side gallery circuit on Saturday.

The list of galleries in my pocket was formidable, all reputable doozies that I would probably give my left arm or at least my left eyeball to show at myself. This is the real thing: art. This is what it's all about, right?

What we need to keep in mind is that these galleries

are, in my opinion, producing

some of the best art around, probably in the whole world.

Consider that we're in New York, a top-tier art city. We're in recession, meaning, the artists who maintain representation, and the galleries who keep their doors open, are arguably the best of the best. We're on the LES, and because there are significantly fewer economic pressures – paying lower rent than Chelsea, operating at a lower price range, etc. – there is a greater liberty to take risks; yet, it is still highly accessible to important critics, collectors, and others who assign value to art.

My favorite gallery-going partner, let's call him "J," is not an artist, but a regular old civilian who has no art historical background whatsoever, doesn't believe the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) should have any government funding at all, but is generally interested in contemporary art, and goes to see a fair amount of shows each month. I treasure his opinion more than almost anyone else's.



Sarah Sze, "Hidden Relief" (2001) (image via tanyabonakdargallery.com)

His vision is unclouded by art theory, he doesn't get the art historical in-jokes, he doesn't pick up on obtuse philosophical references, he has zero qualms about demanding with a furtive glance that we leave immediately, and once outside a gallery, dismissing a show with statements like, "Artists are boring." No opportunistic career-driven chit chat, no pretending to "get it" just to look smart, no friendship-ties with anyone we're going to see today: refreshing! Just to give you an example of his unfettered taste: in August, in Chelsea, J really liked Sarah Sze's installations at Tanya Bonakdar, but thought Mel Bochner's *Die*, 2005, painting at Mitchell Innes & Nash left something to be desired ("Every word piece looks like that. Every artist does that," he said. *Charming, isn't he?*)

It all started off pleasantly, J and I had walked on Orchard Street many times before to go shopping at all the little boutiques, get coffee and pasties at little bakeries, you know the drill. I was struck by J.'s frightened reaction as I lead him off of Chrystie and into the long "marble" hallway that leads to Canada Gallery. He was actually a little terrified. "Are we even allowed to be in here?" and "Are you sure this is the right place?" I had never thought about it quite so literally, but a lot of the spaces we art-types end up hanging out in are actually *scary*. Freakishly cold lighting, cast concrete floors, bare white walls, weird shit hanging everywhere; it is a little scary.



Installation view of Matt Connors's "You Don't Know" at Canada Gallery (image via canadanyewyork.com)

The whole gallery looked abandoned, except for a shearling-collared leather jacket hanging on the railing at the entrance. A solo painting show titled *You Don't Know* was apparently aptly titled, as J. really didn't know who Kazimir Malevich was, so really didn't get the white-on-white box or the four-black-corners paintings that were clearly referencing (ridiculing?) Suprematist painting.

In the second room, there was about twenty or so artfully dressed people attending an artist talk by the painter, Matt Connors. Despite some rather unwelcoming glances from several attendees, we listened in on his talk for a while, which I thought sounded rather intelligent. We caught the bit where he was discussing how he selected the three intentionally clashing reds (burgundy, China orange-red, and fuchsia-red) he selected in three different pieces in the same room. J, on the other hand, thought he sounded, "like a douchebag."

J's reaction to the artist talk at Canada lead me to consider, is art-talk, in general, really douchebaggy sounding? I knew exactly what Connors was talking about, regarding play, problem solving, intuitive decision making, the edges of the painting, etc., but to J, all of this was jargon. I was in on the joke, I laughed when I walked in and saw the quasi-copy of *Suprematist Composition: White On White*, 1917; I thought the variety of painting styles, matching framing, and digital print "sculptures" were conceptually tight and aesthetically accomplished. It was, however, problematic for me that my un-art-educated companion couldn't get into Connors' show at all.



Installation view of the Matthew Chambers exhibition at Canada Gallery (image via nyuntitled.com)

Meanwhile, Untitled (the gallery) was, I kid you not, “*rather* pleased to announce its first ever-solo [sic] exhibition” [from the press release, emphasis mine] of Matthew Chambers (born 1982, Boise, ID). Jel Mesler and Carol Cohen “curated” this show of thirty-six eight-by-four foot canvases hung edge-to-edge around the entire gallery, painted so recently that the rancid smell of oil paint stick permeated the entire space.

I will continue to quote the press release verbatim it must be the quintessential example of a profound disconnection between what a show *is* and what it is purported to be by its own press release:

Chambers ... is in constant dialog with the history of representational and abstract painting.

This statement aggrandizes Chambers’s work as a painter, setting the show up for automatic failure; a Gerhard Richter or Sigmar Polke Chambers is not. It is simultaneously meaningless; *to paint* in the contemporary moment *is inherently to be in dialogue with the history of painting*. An even bigger bill that this 28 year-old artist couldn’t possibly live up to: “In this archive there is a complete totalization and deconsecration of the image and its referent.” Without having read the press release, J said the show was, “Depressing,” and I concurred.



Installation view of the Roger White show at the Rachel Uffner Gallery (image via racheluffnergallery.com)

Then there's the Rachel Uffner Gallery. Things that work in Rachel Uffner's benefit: you don't have to snake through a long hallway of fake marble and florescent lighting to get to her gallery. I had been looking forward to this show. I had just discovered Roger White at the Mitchell Innes & Nash group show *Item* in August, then later that same day at Foxy Productions, now a solo at Rachel Uffner. Who is this guy? Google revealed, much to my surprise, that White has written reviews for the *Brooklyn Rail* of just about every artist I like: chronologically, Charlene von Heyl, Dike Blair, R. H. Quaytman, etc.



Roger White, "Untitled" (2009), watercolor on paper, 12" x 8 3/4" (30.5 x 22.2 cm) (image via racheluffnergallery.com)

Normally, such blatantly *beautiful* work would raise serious philosophical concerns regarding the commodity of objects in the art market, and the ultimate deathblow in painting critique: "O.T.C." ("That painting would look *great* 'over the couch.'") Somehow White's abstractions based on observational painting avoid these initial reactions. Acting as foils for his large abstractions, Uffner's back room reveals White's still life paintings that have a Avigdor Arikha slash Fairfield Porter-like poetic economy. The watercolors that inform large paintings are complex and full of light. White foregrounds his material explorations with oil. He treats it like watercolor, allowing bright white, yellow and pink grounds to shine through.

My gallery-buddy pointed out that the big paintings brushwork was "sloppy," and that he preferred the multicolored paintings, and in fact, even the multicolored shapes *in* those paintings to the duochromes (is that a word?). Maybe White's new wet-into-wet technique doesn't work on a non-painter audience, but to my mind, the organic patterns read more clearly on a larger scale and

are hypnotizing. They combine the dissonant language of contemporary painting (see Sigmar Polke's *Untitled (Lapis Lazuli)*, 1998) with the flatness and sequential top-to-bottom, left-to-right read of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

I got the show at Canada, J didn't at all – which I think was a problem, mainly for Connors. We had the same reaction to *Untitled* (furtive glances exchanged) and to Rachel Uffner: White's watercolors and some of his big paintings were amazing. On the cutting edge of the art world in the ideal neighborhood and gallery circuit, there are only a few good things?

Across the board, I was stunned by the prices at *all* of the spaces. What I would have judged to be a \$8,000–\$12,000 object was priced at a measly \$5,500. There were prints and posters and drawings and little photographs available at almost every gallery we saw, and their prices were even lower, some plunging into the two-figure range. J. still thought that was pretty expensive for a poster, whereas I'm used to Pace's sold-out list of thirty or forty \$100,000 paintings all smaller than 24 inches in any direction. The galleries have clearly adjusted their prices according to demand.



Left, Rachel Uffner (via Artnet.com); right, Annie Edson Taylor (via Wikipedia)

How these joints are staying in business is a miracle. Rachel Uffner jokingly pointed out that locals frequently stop into her gallery and are awestruck by her business's existence, and wish her "Best of luck!" not unlike the types of well-wishes famed adventurer Annie Edson Taylor probably received as she climbed into her barrel to go over Niagara Falls in 1902. All joking aside, Uffner's solo show of Roger White was genuinely good art, and considering everything else we saw yesterday, that's another miracle.

Matt Connors's You Don't Know at Canada Gallery is on until November 21.

Matthew Chambers at Untitled continues until December 12.

Roger White at Rachel Uffner Gallery closes on December 19.

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