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At the Galleries

LAST SEASON'S MOST CONTENTIOUS EXHIBITION, on this side of the Atlantic, was the 2017 edition of the Whitney Biennial, the first since the museum moved into its Renzo Piano building Downtown. The show is always problematic. Half a century ago, reviewers of the original Whitney Annual, which alternated surveys of painting with sculpture and works on paper, often complained, just as critics do today, that the selection did not accurately represent the best of American art at the time and, again like their recent counterparts, sometimes objected to specific inclusions and omissions.

But this year's Biennial triggered different responses. The emphasis was on political content and social commentary rather than aesthetic considerations, and much of the exhibited work ranged from rude to raucous to abrasive to downright offensive. Admittedly, my experience of the videos was incomplete because hand-held camera makes me seasick and I dislike overly loud sound; I also heeded friends' warnings to avoid the virtual reality simulated murder. That still left, as many people noted, a good deal of painting, some sculpture, and multimedia installations. Much of the painting was deliberately inept—evidence of modish “de-skilling,” the effort of people with expensive art school educations to appear self-taught and not overly gifted. Henry Taylor's fierce, brushy comments on contemporary African-American life, including recent horrors perpetrated by the police, and Jo Baer's cool, ambiguous, otherworldly “landscapes” were exceptions. Since neither of these compelling painters is a newcomer, this suggests that experience counts, along with intelligence and respect for one's chosen medium.

Much of the sculpture was cobbled together from found elements seemingly chosen primarily for their non-art associations. An initial encounter with one of Kaari Upson's roughly painted objects, for example, was moderately interesting until we realized that the large, lumpy, paint-swiped object before us was a sofa turned on end; then all of Upson's pieces persisted in looking like exactly what they were—furniture, displaced and covered with paint.

As just about everyone now knows, Dana Schutz's painting about Emmett Till (the least interesting of her included works) triggered astonishing hostility, at least from people who believe that artists may address only subjects directly related to their own experience, race,

ethnic group, gender, sexual preference, and all the rest of it, a point of view that essentially wipes out the entire history of art. What, for example, gave Titian, an aged Venetian, the right to paint *The Flying of Marsyas*? He was neither Greek nor a god nor a presumptuous satyr. Schutz's public defense seemed wimpy; she realized, she said, that she shouldn't have chosen the subject, but as a mother, she identified with Till's mother's pain. Why shouldn't she have chosen it? And why not say the intention was to honor Till? And, while I'm at it, why didn't anyone object to Pope.L aka William Pope.L's enormous enterable cube covered with slices of desiccated bologna, each with a paint-smeared photo? The number of slices, we were told, was calculated to correspond to the number of Jews in New York. It appears that a white woman who makes a painting about a horrible incident in recent American history involving a young African-American boy provokes international wrath, but an African-American man can create a literally unappetizing, demeaning metaphor for an entire culture not his own with impunity.

Fortunately for those of us exasperated by that sort of thing, there was no shortage of exhibitions last season in which aesthetic concerns overwhelmed politics or sociology—such as Edward Shalala's 2008 series "The Architecture of Painting," a few blocks uptown from the Whitney, at Luise Ross Gallery, in Chelsea. Shalala, who more recently has been making photographs documenting ephemeral string drawings in the landscape, here revealed what might be the origins of those works. Despite the title, nothing in "The Architecture of Painting" was made with paint. Instead, Shalala turned the basic components of the traditional support—stretcher and canvas—into small, mysterious objects with the complexity, economy, and subtlety of minimalist paintings. The resulting quiet, absorbing constructions depended on a paradoxical coexistence of fragility and forthright physicality.

Shalala pulls threads from the canvas to create remarkably varied geometric patterns and "images," each with its own density, rhythm, and tonality. The ends of the threads occasionally dangle, suggesting the history of the configuration, yet we think less about how the nuanced shadings were achieved than about the unpredictable object before us. We see through and into some works, glimpsing the often substantial wooden stretcher; others keep us reading across the surface. At Luise Ross, we were engaged first by the "drawing"—now frail lines, now aggressive bands, now a series of parallels, now moving in several directions—and only later began to savor the delicacy and precision of Shalala's labor-intensive process. We noticed, too, the shifts in tone and color resulting from different materials and different amounts of extraction. We wondered if the most robust, layered pieces, whose wooden structures sometimes competed with the absent threads, should be classified as relief sculptures. "The Architecture of Painting" was a gathering of eye-testing, exquisitely refined works that made us reconsider our definition of painting itself.

Also in Chelsea, further reconsideration was provoked, as usual, by

Frank Stella's recent constructions at Marianne Boesky Gallery. As we've come to expect from this unstoppably inventive artist, many of them incorporated lush color and/or unexpected materials, such as Corian or something called "elasto plastic." The show was anchored by versions of the freestanding openwork stars first seen at Stella's stunning retrospective at the Whitney. Other, wall-hung works projected aggressively into space, while still others rested on open, geometric supports. Despite their often complex, layered three-dimensionality, these unpredictable constructions usually insisted that we think of them as demanding, authoritative paintings, rather than as sculptures. Part of this may result from Stella's extremely casual approach to supporting his works, which is why his suspended pieces are often more satisfying than those that stand on their own. But part of this "paintingness" has to do with the way the structures present themselves as a series of very clear, individual, essentially pictorial facets, no matter how much they ask us to keep moving around them or how deeply we see into them.

I particularly liked the exhibition's two smallest works, one that seemed to hover above a four-square table-like structure, the other wall-hung, both distinguished by their notes of seductive color, played against silvery aluminum, and their enlivening combination of clarity and density. The piece with the table, *Over the Waves*, 2016, was a tense conflation of warped mesh, "scribbled" color, and extended geometric bars that simultaneously evoked wind-filled sails and *guéridon* still lifes. The wall-hung work was one of two constructions titled *Canadian Sunset*, both 2016, both about the coexistence of substantial color masses. The smaller piece was a vigorously modeled "painting" within a suspended, open rectangle; the larger was a generous, space-greedy, mainly vertical structure, poised like an oversized, demented heron on a tilted triangular "cage" on casters. Both iterations of *Canadian Sunset* were impressive, but the large piece was among Stella's most fully developed, "sculpturally" articulate works to date. The way it embraced space, its play of curvilinear forms, and its animate "stance" made me think about Hans Hofmann, particularly about a small number of works that flirt with vaguely Surrealist, generous, abstracted bird-like forms. Since Stella reveres Hofmann, has written perceptively about him, and lives with a magnificent canvas of this type, the association may not be fortuitous.

I wasn't sure about the big stars at Stella's Whitney show, and I was even less sure about the ones at Marianne Boesky. Their obvious symmetry in the round makes them atypically predictable, while they seem rather loud and bombastic in mood, despite of their apparently straightforward logic. I understand how they relate to Stella's early explorations of geometry, but I was baffled by the enormous hoof-like "boots" on the supporting points of the stars at Boesky. Yet as always, Stella's recent work overwhelmed us with its energy, ambition, and sense of brash experimentation, and even, on occasion, seduced us with

its lyricism. It's always exciting to see what this American master has been up to.

Energy, ambition (in the best sense of the word) and invention were the dominant characteristics of Julian Hatton's new paintings, "Free Range," at Elizabeth Harris Gallery's Chelsea space. I've sometimes thought of Hatton as a contemporary heir to the best of the German Expressionists. Like them, he has a taste for intensity and for saturated, full-throttle color, deployed to suggest the animation and mutability of nature—which is not to say that Hatton's paintings read as nostalgic. Nor do they read as disguised landscapes. Far from it. They are not factual reports on things seen but potent equivalents for acute perceptions, tempered by equally acute responses to the demands of the evolving picture. The resulting images, at once elusive and richly evocative, keep us alert and a little off-balance. We read zones of intense color as oblique references to landscape elements or passages of lively drawing as hints at specific but unidentifiable phenomena, at the same time that we see them purely as engaging painting events. Things pulse between the fact of paint on canvas, expressively deployed, and allusive overtones; color relationships and paint applications conspire to suggest unstable space and to assert both the literal surface of the canvas and the energy of growth. Hatton investigates extremes of complexity and economy, often in the same painting. His strongest works translate the natural world into a metaphorical, abstract language of paint, as inflected by the history art as it is by observation.

"Free Range" included a substantial number of small panels, usually looser and simpler than the larger canvases, with most notable differences resulting from the scale of the mark; a single stab of a brush, on a small panel, can count as much as a gathering of ample strokes in a larger work. In a sense, the relationship between Hatton's small and large paintings is rather like the relationship between the world of nature and his finished canvases: parallel but not precise. The small panels are not direct preparations for large works, but rather initial notes—preliminary but complete distillations of experience into non-literal images. Hatton has been a painter to pay attention to for years, but it's not an overstatement to say that "Free Range" included some of his most vigorous, achieved works to date.

Uptown, Victoria Munroe showed mixed media works on paper by the late modernist master Stephen Greene and small sculptures by the British-born, New York-resident Lee Tribe at her handsome new Upper East Side space. The works on paper from Greene's series, *Biographs*, made between 1967 and 1969, and from a group made in the early 1970s, confirmed him to be one of the most inventive and expressive draftsmen of the twentieth century: an artist with a ravishing touch and an uncanny ability to orchestrate a wide range of applications, from sharp lines to inchoate smudges, and an equally wide range of forms, from hard-edged to ambiguous, for maximum drama. The relatively

precise, crisp *Biographs* play delicately wrought geometric elements, like diagrams for incomprehensible machines, against more organic forms and less disciplined passages, while the slightly later works depend on soft-edged swipes, bleeds, and fragile configurations that can imply everything from skulls to sinister flowers.

As a young painter in the late 1940s, Greene (1917–1999) first attracted attention for eerie Renaissance-inspired figurative paintings with imprecise religious overtones. Introspective figures, crutches, crosses, skulls, and bones seemed emblematic of the aftermath of World War II. (One of these early works, *The Shadow*, 1950, with a skeleton as a protagonist, was recently included in “Human Interest: Portraits from the Whitney’s Collection.”) Despite the acclaim that greeted these paintings, Greene’s work became increasingly abstract, populated, like the works on paper at Victoria Munroe, with collisions of disparate forms, inflections of divergent paint-handling, and a moody, seductive palette, together carrying all of the emotional charge of his early imagery. Occasionally, too, as in some of the exhibited drawings, haunting images would coalesce within his lush abstractions—something seen as anomalous, at the time, that now seems remarkably prescient. Greene is a major artist whose work always rewards attention. Fortunately for those of us who admire him, Jason McCoy Gallery has been exhibiting his paintings fairly regularly. (Summer travelers can see a late abstraction at the Portland Museum of Art, Maine.) The show at Victoria Munroe allowed us to see a more intimate side of this fascinating painter.

“Intimate” was the obvious word for Lee Tribe’s small, constructed steel *Bathers*, which, like Greene’s works on paper, conflate geometry and biomorphism. Tribe’s playful, linear, drawing-like improvisations, all made in 2016, had their origins in small scraps and fragments of metal left over from larger works, so in a sense, they could be read as the equivalent of rapid sketches. (Since Tribe is a virtuoso metalworker, the idea of his sketching with small pieces of steel and a torch is perfectly logical.) All of the works on view freely suggested reclining figures, with a nod to Picasso. Casually disposed arcs and loops of slender metal, narrow bars and curves, seemed to conjure up the body’s trajectory through space—stretching, moving from prone to supine, propping, relaxing—rather than describing volumetric, body-like forms. Painted bands of color, at wide intervals, punctuated the sculptures. When they worked best, the bands emphasized the proportions and articulations of the little “figures.” Not all of Tribe’s constructions seemed to require these embellishments, but all the notes of color collectively added to the lighthearted mood of the sculptures, a nice counterpoint to Greene’s lyrical but sometimes faintly ominous inventions. The pairing of the two artists who, at first acquaintance, seemed so different—working in different media, belonging to different generations, with different formations—proved resonant and provocative. Greene’s works on paper made us consider Tribe’s sculptures in new ways and vice versa.

Nearby, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, two overlapping installa-

tions, one spanning more than a thousand years of indigenous North American culture, the other focused on the seventeenth century in Italy, reminded us of just how encyclopedic this amazing institution is, not only in its collecting, but also in its programming. The former show, "American Indian Art from the Fenimore Art Museum: The Thaw Collection," was a magnificent selection from works usually exhibited in Cooperstown, New York. The latter, "Caravaggio's Last Two Paintings," centered on a pair of canvases painted in the last months of the artist's short, turbulent life—born in 1571, he died in 1610—in a context of paintings by artists he influenced, from the Met's collections, plus one of Caravaggio's early efforts, borrowed for the occasion.

The works from the Fenimore include pottery, textiles, carvings, baskets and many other kinds of objects, from the domestic and utilitarian to the sacred and ritualistic. All are extraordinarily handsome and clearly chosen by exacting, discerning collectors. Among the most spectacular is a late-nineteenth-century war record, painted on hide by Lakota Sioux artists, an explosion of lively horses and warriors depicted with such spirited elegance and clarity that the violence of the subject is overwhelmed. A drawing book, also late nineteenth century, by Black Hawk, a Lakota Sioux, presents the protagonists of a Buffalo Dreamers ceremony as agile figures holding hoops and fans, wearing massive, urgently scrawled buffalo heads with the manes cascading down their shoulders. Equally alluring is a severe, richly painted, late nineteenth-century Kwakiutl Potlatch figure, from the Northwest Coast, and a waterproof seal intestine parka, by a late-nineteenth-century Yup'ik artist, embroidered with red geometric patterns. Among the most moving works are beautifully patterned woven tumplines, for carrying loads on one's back supported by a band across the forehead, made by ancient Pueblo dwellers, the oldest dating back to the tenth century. The persistence of the culture is attested to by a suave pot, decorated with related motifs, made by Maria Martinez, a brilliant potter from San Ildefonso Pueblo who died in 1980 at ninety-three. Although the installation includes only thirty-eight works from the Thaw Collection—a larger selection is permanently on view at the Fenimore Museum—it encompasses cultures from Alaska to Mesoamerica, so it bears graphic witness to the diverse character and wide-ranging skills of the many different original inhabitants of the North American continent. And most of the objects on view are just plain gorgeous.

Upstairs, in the European painting galleries, those of us who can't ever get enough of the work of Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio, could revel in the pairing of two of the very last works made by the notorious bad boy and unalloyed genius of the Italian Baroque, painted in Naples, shortly before he died, while attempting to return to Rome, hoping for a papal pardon for the murder that had sent him into exile. The paintings had last been together in 2004, so the Met's installation offered a rare opportunity for study and appreciation—yet another reason to be grateful to the Met's Chairman of the Department of European Paintings, Keith Christiansen.

The two works, *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*, on loan from the Banca

Intesa Sanpaolo, Naples, and the Met's *The Denial of Saint Peter*, are typical works by the artist. Witness their highly charged, dramatic subject matter hinging on explicit or emotional violence; their half-length figures "spot-lit" against deep shadows; and their cast of characters that includes soldiers in armor, handsome women, and a bald, wrinkled old man. Each of the main characters, the doomed but resolute Ursula and the guilt-wracked Peter, seems introspective and almost isolated from the surrounding action, a suggestion emphasized by their self-referential gestures, made more expressive by the dramatic lighting.

What sets the two last pictures apart, however, is the economy and directness of their paint-handling. Unlike most of his colleagues, Caravaggio never made preparatory drawings, preferring to work directly on the canvas, but these last works seem even more spontaneous and summary than usual—something made more evident by the presence of the installation's early Caravaggio Madonna and the works by his followers, all far more refined in modeling and paint application. It's as if Caravaggio became even more daring and uninhibited in his last works, as if he managed to have a "late style" while still a young man. The two ferocious paintings at the Met make us feel that we are watching them evolve, observing their volatile author at work. Caravaggio's *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula* and *The Denial of Saint Peter* are welcome proof that, unlike the majority of the works in the Whitney Biennial, art can deal with fiercely provocative, even disturbing, narratives without compromising aesthetic brilliance. A visit to the Met's installation should have been mandatory for all those angry, politically engaged participants in the Whitney's show.