

ART REVIEW

At 7 Art Galleries, the Ecstatic Flow of Paint and the Stories It Can Tell

By Roberta Smith

Sept. 27, 2018

Few truths about paint are more basic than this: it tends to go on wet, whether on canvas, furniture or buildings, and then it dries. Once dried, it can preserve a sense of its original fluidity to greatly varying degrees. In the postwar years it became a sure sign of modernity and freshness. It's dynamic, at times volcanic, like artistic genius is supposed to be, but it can also have a comedic, even ironic quality. It conveys immediacy, material reality, improvisation as well as flamboyance and glamour, savoir faire.

Giving full voice to the liquidity of paint has gone in and out of style since it was liberated in the 1940s by the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock, Janet Sobel and Norman Lewis. In the mid-1950s, Helen Frankenthaler opened further possibilities. Working on the floor, she thinned her paint to the consistency of water, creating floods and eddies of color that soaked into the canvas. Her techniques established the Color Field School in the United States. The Japanese artists of the Gutai took wetness to fabulous excesses, making it a lavalike substance. Things turned ironic with Andy Warhol's Oxidation series, achieved by the artist and others urinating on canvases painted with copper metallic paint.

Sometime in the 1970s, Color Field fell out of favor and visibly liquid paint had a much a lower profile. You could say it flowed underground. But it never went away, and right now, seven shows in New York galleries give both its present and its recent past a new visibility.

Ed Clark

Through Oct. 20. Mnuchin Gallery, 45 East 78th Street, Manhattan; 212-861-0020, mnuchingallery.com.



Ed Clark's "Elevation," with broad bands and curves of color. Agaton Strom for The New York Times

The career of Ed Clark, now 92, is the subject of this vigorous 40-year career survey, which establishes his singular exploration of the formal and narrative potential of color and paint. Mr. Clark sometimes stains but mostly he wields wide brushes and even brooms, magnifying impasto and brushwork in piled-up strokes that seem to squirm on the surface. More characteristic are broad bands and curves of color that zoom across or out of corners, achieving an almost sculptural force, as in the pale, propulsive streams of "Elevation" (1992), a tumult of sound, water and paint all in one.

In "Blacklash," from 1964, Mr. Clark signals racial anger with his title and a splatter of black paint that fans against red and white, like a cat-o'-nine-tails. In the formally vehement "Orange Front" (1962) a stained orange field is barricaded with broad strokes of blue and blue green; they mostly cover a big black shape, visible from drips that extend from it to the canvas's upper edge.

Vivian Springford

Through Oct. 20. Almine Rech Gallery, 39 East 78th Street, second floor, Manhattan; 212-804 8496, alminerech.com.



Vivian Springford's paintings at Almine Rech Gallery. "Concentric poolings of translucent colors," the critic writes, "introduce intimations of flowers, clouds and water reflections." Matt Kroening/Almine Rech Gallery

Virtually next door to Mnuchin, the Almine Rech Gallery is showing the little-known Color Field painter Vivian Springford (1913-2003), whose work resurfaced in an exhibition at the Gary Snyder Gallery in 1998, several years after macular degeneration had forced her to stop painting. Most of the paintings here feature concentric poolings of translucent colors that intimate flowers, clouds and water reflections. They build on the potential of Georgia O'Keeffe's early watercolors — as O'Keeffe did not — but also evoke the art critic Robert Hughes's epithet about the Color Field paintings being "giant watercolors." The smaller, more intensely colored works are livelier, especially an untitled painting from 1972 that evokes Arthur Dove's visionary conjurings of nature.

Larry Poons

Through Oct. 27. Yares Art, East 57th Street, Manhattan; 212-256-0969, yaresart.com.



Larry Poons's "Pumpkin," left, and "Spanish Dancer" at Yares Art in New York City. The paint "ran down the surface in thick rivulets."

2018 Larry Poons/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Agaton Strom for The New York Times

Larry Poons has always been something of a maverick who trusts his instincts and never minds fashion. He first became known in the early 1960s for stripped down "dot" paintings whose combination of evenly stained color, punctuated with small precise lozenges, aligned him with Color Field, Minimalism and Op Art in one fell swoop. By the late 1960s, he had gone heavy-duty, creating thick, creviced topographies of paint poured on horizontal unstretched canvases soon designated the "Elephant Skin" series.

By 1971, the canvas was back on the wall, and Mr. Poons was throwing paint from cans and buckets, always aiming high. It ran down the surface in thick rivulets as funkily literal as they are associational. Words like vines, rain, waterfalls and fountains run through the mind in this rare and wonderful show, titled "Ruffles Queequeg + The Throw Decade 1971-1981." (The reference to Queequeg of "Moby Dick" fame is a transitional wavelike work.) I can imagine these pieces holding their own against Monet's "Waterlilies." In an essay in the catalog, Frank Stella, the painter and Mr. Poons's friend, calls him "Mr. Natural," which seems accurate.

Frank Bowling

Through Oct. 13. Alexander Gray Associates, 510 West 26th Street, Manhattan; 212-399-2636, alexandergray.com.



Frank Bowling's "Elder Sun Benjamin," on display in an exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates.
2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London; Agaton Strom for The New York Times

The Guyana-born, London-educated painter Frank Bowling, now 86, imperiously takes Ezra Pound's famous battle cry to artists as the title of his show of recent work: "Make It New." What Mr. Bowling has been making new for much of his career is Color Field painting, messing it up with added images and references. When he was living in New York in the 1970s, the continents of Africa or South America sometimes floated behind his fluorescent fields of color. (Hints of them recur in "Another Morrison as in Stuart.")

Elsewhere, Mr. Bowling undermines the style's pristine aloofness and one-shot purity by adding bits of fabric, thread and whatnot. These make reference to craft and ritual, and to time, reconsideration and even decay. But Mr. Bowling refuses predictability: "Drift I" and "Drift II" (2018) are formally ironic, door-size canvases printed with bright stripes, each topped with an eruption of paint as thick as melted ice cream.

Joan Mitchell

Through Nov. 3. Cheim & Read, 547 West 25th Street, Manhattan; 212-242-7727, cheimread.com.



Joan Mitchell, “Untitled (Blue Michigan),” 1961, at Cheim & Read, with slashing brush work that challenges Jackson Pollock. Estate of Joan Mitchell, via Cheim & Read, New York

I’ve never been enamored of Joan Mitchell’s early paintings, but some of the best are in Cheim & Read’s latest exploration of her achievement, expansively titled “Paintings From the Middle of the Last Century, 1953-1962.” Their slashing brush work challenge Pollock. Like Ed Clark, she relished speed, but worked more intuitively, yet often arrived at an uneasy brittleness in the swirls of strokes.

The show tracks the slowing down that was Mitchell’s development. There’s still some slashing, but with wider brushes more loaded with color, which decreases the blender effect. With the blues, green and oranges of “Blue Michigan” from 1961, we see Mitchell reach maturity, beginning a 30-year phase that lasted until her death — and during which she only got better.

Mary Weatherford

Through Oct. 15. Gagosian, 555 West 24th Street, Manhattan; 212-741 1111, gagosian.com.



Mary Weatherford's painting "Gloria" is pierced with flashes from neon on linen, at the Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea, New York City. Agaton Strom for The New York Times

With "I've Seen Gray Whales Go By," Mary Weatherford joins the small group of female painters who have taken over, with aplomb, the big top that is the Gagosian franchise's West 24th Street space. She is aided by four new paintings nearly 10 feet across, like the exuberantly messy pink-on-pink "Gloria." More power to her. Ms. Weatherford has painted for over two decades, dabbling in appropriation, adding objects to her abstract canvases, and moving from New York back to Los Angeles. There she hit on her signature device: finishing her lyrical stain paintings with one or two lengths of neon that extend up or across their surfaces, their draped cords and adapters on display. In other words the paintings are visibly electric, empowered, lighted from within and alive.

They are also ecstatic, pierced by beams of light, similar to Bernini's "Ecstasy of St. Theresa." The combination is beautiful, ironic and rococo, bridging the gap between painters like Helen Frankenthaler and Post-Minimalists like Bruce Nauman and Keith Sonnier. A strange unity is achieved. You can't imagine the canvases without their neon, and Ms. Weatherford holds back her

aggressive brush strokes to foster this reciprocity. It's great to see her in a space where macho painting tends to prevail, but attaching lengths of neon to paintings has its limitations. Six years on, this show may be their last hurrah.

Elizabeth Neel

Through Oct. 27. Mary Boone, 541 West 24th Street, Manhattan; 212-752-2929, maryboonegallery.com.



Elizabeth Neel's "Madonna as a Man" at Mary Boone Gallery. Mary Boone Gallery

Like Mary Weatherford, Elizabeth Neel adds unexpected elements to her painterly abstractions: hard-edge geometric shapes in black or white as well as textured rubbing-like silhouettes of insects. These added elements accent the methodical way the paintings are built up, for example with mirroring Rorschach-like motifs. The paintings have a new clarity that makes them Ms. Neel's most impressive efforts so far. The show's title — "Tangled on a Serpent Chair" — suggests an artist on the hot seat, which may, creatively speaking, be a good place to work from.

Correction: September 28, 2018

An earlier version of this article misstated the year of a Gary Snyder Gallery exhibition. It took place in 1998, not 1988.

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