

ART & DESIGN

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

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DONA NELSON

Through May 20. Thomas Erben Gallery, 526 West 26th Street, Manhattan; 212-645-8701, thomaserben.com.

The painter Dona Nelson has never been one to set limits. For years now, she has made some of the toughest paintings around, articulating her medium with dissonant techniques, surfaces and colors; freely mixing figuration and abstraction into elaborate narratives of process, art and life while regularly trespassing into three dimensions. But these tendencies have rarely been stated as elaborately, intensely or joyously as in “Models Stand Close to the Paintings,” at Thomas Erben in Chelsea, a show of nine new works accompanied by two earlier ones serving as their footnotes.

The installation forms a loose, kaleidoscopic maze of contrasting viewpoints. Especially complicated are two free-standing pieces made on two door-size panels. Verging on architecture, “By the Yard” (which has wonderful areas of coarse, crazed embroidery) and “Passengers” almost require wedging yourself between the panels to see the four-sided progressions of linked images. Sometimes evoking the blocky figures of the Russian Constructivists, the exceptional “Platform” presents

two panels side by side, with contrasting figurative styles, types of material and degrees of abstraction on four surfaces.

Ms. Nelson began working both sides of free-standing canvases long before it became a craze among younger painters. A prime example here is “Lavender Lion,” whose thick pours or stains of lavender, purple and yellow continue her longtime dialogue with Jackson Pollock — growling at his painting “Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)”? Ms. Nelson’s signature cheesecloth is used here, creating looping skeins of stenciled lines on one side and an orderly grid on the other. In “Autumn Andrew,” green cheesecloth suggests tall grass behind a larger-than-life portrait of a seated man with a thoughtful face and a blue-checked shirt, both wonderfully painted. This is a great show. ROBERTA SMITH

ROCHELLE GOLDBERG

Through May 14. Miguel Abreu Gallery, 88 Eldridge Street, Manhattan; 212-995-1774, miguelabreugallery.com.

Never less than ambitious, Rochelle Goldberg’s sculpture installations suggestively combine low-lying ceramic forms and organic substances, including moss and chia seeds. With “Intralocutors,” her extensive show at the Miguel Abreu Gallery on the Lower East Side, Ms. Goldberg considerably ups the ante, incorporating the figure and cribbing from art history and the Bible. The result is a tantalizing if fragmented narrative rescued from inscrutability by the intensity of its materials, forms and styles.

The focus is the three main Marys of the New Testament: the Virgin Mary, and two women usually portrayed as repentant sinners, Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt, whose lives the Roman Catholic Church often plays down. The prevailing mood is one of suffering: pilgrimages, confinement, penance and death.

The Marys are represented by 11 glazed-ceramic heads, busts and nearly life-size figures, all clearly based on Donatello’s emaciated Mary Magdalene, a surpassing sculpture made in the 1450s on the verge of the High Renaissance. The busts rest on modern-looking palettes of tile in carved and painted medium-density fiberboard; the standing figures are covering themselves in raggedy yet

luxuriant pieces of felted hair and fur.

Ms. Goldberg transforms the figures by using twisted coils of clay. They seem not only starved but also flayed, made of excrement or Medusa-like snakes. Two suspended arrangements of feathers evoke church vaults, but also swarming birds or locusts. A third piece suggests shattered bathtubs or maybe desecrated baptismal fonts. Elsewhere, delicate steel train tracks, resting on pieces of ginger root or glazed ceramic feet, traverse dry, desert-like scatterings of Chia seeds.

Like Elaine Cameron-Weir, Ms. Goldberg builds narratives from colliding materials, eras and styles, bringing to mind the 1980s sculpture of Bonnie Collura, whose own strange meldings, then and since, should be better known. ROBERTA SMITH

SARA CWYNAR

Through May 14. Foxy Production, 2 East Broadway, Manhattan; 212-239-2758, foxyproduction.com.

In recent years, the emphasis in photography has shifted from thinking about individual images to thinking about the apparatuses that produce and circulate them. Sara Cwynar's "Rose Gold," at Foxy Production, focuses on one such device: Apple's rose-gold iPhone, introduced in 2015, which inspired cult consumerism and a New Yorker essay titled "The Semiotics of 'Rose Gold.'"

Ms. Cwynar's photographs — descendants of the color-saturated post-Conceptualism of Christopher Williams and Roe Ethridge — look like mock-ups for advertising campaigns or editorial layouts. "Tracy (Grid 1)" (2017) features a friend of the artist's lounging against a rumpled backdrop of rephotographed color samples, while other images include fragments of text and adhesive page markers.

The film "Rose Gold" (2017) borrows from educational films and Jean-Luc Godard's jump-cut editing, and includes a voice-over that incorporates quotations from, and references to, the writings of authors like Toni Morrison, Lauren Berlant and Ludwig Wittgenstein. It also shows Ms. Cwynar demonstrating the "touch" elements of smartphone technology.

Color, however — not innovative technology — was the prime selling point of the rose gold phone. It has been critical in art-photography discussions, too. Ms. Cwynar's dye sublimation prints and 16-millimeter film (transferred to video) have the nostalgic look of early Autochrome and Kodachrome processes, and this association is amplified by showcasing products, from melamine plastic kitchenware to cosmetics, marketed for their new and modern hues. All of these seem to serve as subtexts or springboards for thinking about the importance of color, not just in photography but in the social, political and economic apparatuses surrounding it. MARTHA SCHWENDENER

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