

5 Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now

Julie Mehretu's prints; Lee Lozano's drawings; paintings by the Florida Highwaymen; sculptures by Hugh Hayden; and a survey of protest art.

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Julie Mehretu

Through Sept. 18. Gemini G.E.L. at Joni Moisant Weyl, 535 West 24th Street, third floor, Manhattan, (212) 249-3324, gemini@joniweyl.com.

Someone — surely an artist — once said that the best criticism of a work of art is another work of art. If so, the excellent exhibition of prints here that Julie Mehretu made at the Gemini G.E.L. workshop from 2008 to 2018 is usefully critical of the paintings that dominate her current midcareer survey at the Whitney Museum.

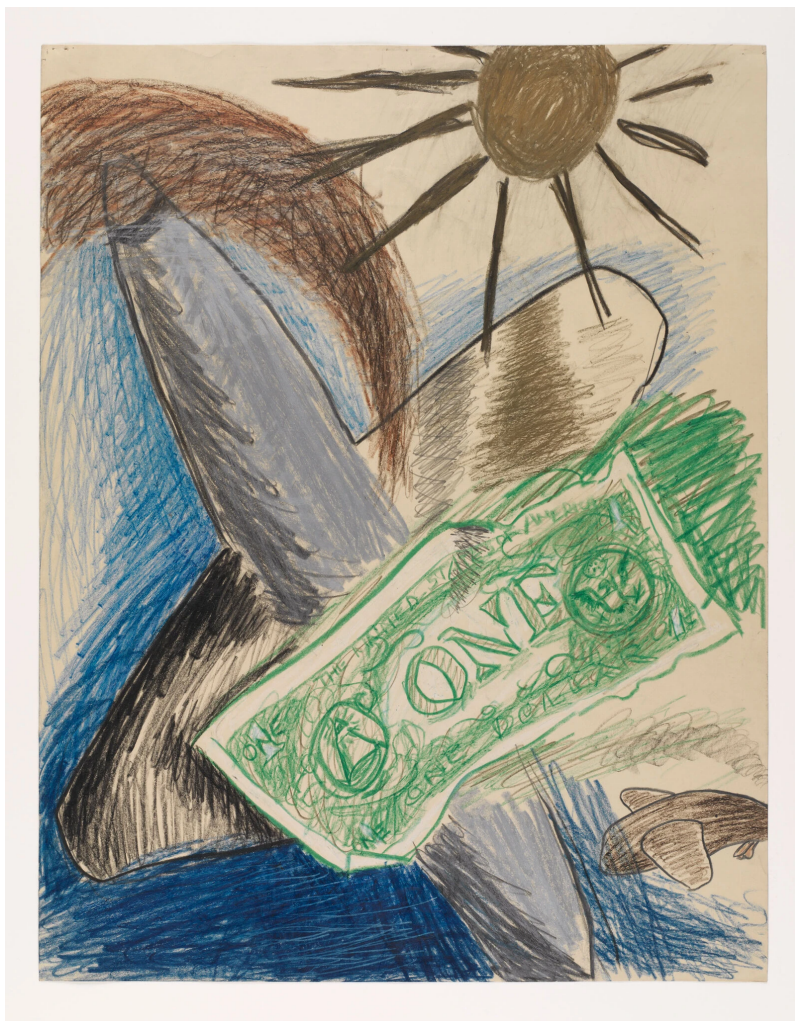
Mehretu has never stood still as an artist, but the prints she began making in 2008 have been consistently stronger than her paintings in every way: touch, spatial illusion, color and especially scale. They exude a kind of lushness, avoiding the brittle impersonality and formal melodrama often found in her paintings. These last two qualities were mostly banished in the black-on-grey paintings seen at Marian Goodman in 2016, but they have resurfaced in her latest canvases.

The prints, meanwhile, have mostly gone from strength to strength. The earliest works in the show are three small dry point etchings from 2008, 2010 and 2012 remarkable for their variety of delicate marks and their brinkmanship between abstraction and representation. (They conjure the exploded landscapes in Otto Dix's "War" etchings of 1924.) The show's high points are "Six Bardos," a suite of large aquatints from 2018 inspired by the six intervals between life and death in Buddhism. They suavely combine graffiti, calligraphy and fragments of images into effortless tangles of lines that sometimes glow from within. Five are beautifully colored, the sixth and final one, "Last Breath," is a dense, all-black tangle that nonetheless levitates. That title aside, the "Bardo" prints have a pulse that too many of the paintings at the Whitney lack.

ROBERTA SMITH

Lee Lozano

Through Aug. 13, Karma, 22 East 2nd Street, Manhattan; 212-390-8290, karmakarma.org.



An untitled 1962 work by Lee Lozano in the exhibition “Lee Lozano: Drawings 1959-1964” at Karma. Estate of Lee Lozano, Karma and Hauser & Wirth

Lee Lozano was, to borrow the title of Nell Painter’s wry 2018 memoir, “Old in Art School.” She had already earned a bachelor’s degree at the University of Chicago in 1951 before beginning art school and graduating with a B.F.A. from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1960. From there she quickly moved to New York. “Drawings 1959-1964” at Karma tracks the early blaze of her career, from student work to finding a voice as an artist.

Perennial art school subjects dominate the drawings from 1959 and 1960, most of which are untitled. There are human skulls rendered in graphite on paper, portraits and fragments of still life: a stray walnut, an asymmetrical strawberry. Then the work takes an abrupt turn. Phalluses, crucifixes, planes and tools appear, drawn in bright crayon and charcoal, often as crude sight gags. Tag lines taken from New York subway advertisements are subverted into vulgar slogans, most of which can’t be printed here.

Elements of Pop Art, comics and surrealism enter Lozano’s vernacular, which overlaps with painters like Philip Guston and Judith Bernstein, whose turn away from “pure,” nonobjective Abstract Expressionism was an emphatic political statement, and sculptors like Yayoi Kusama and Louise Bourgeois, who treated the phallus as a sculptural amulet or plaything. Within a decade, Lozano, who died in 1999, would shift toward outré conceptual performances like dropping out of the art world and boycotting women. These actions demanded discipline and commitment, but you can see the same impulse here, as Lozano learned to draw like a conventional, competent artist — then unlearned everything to become a great one.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

Highwaymen

Through Aug. 13. Charles Moffett, 511 Canal Street, second floor, Manhattan. 212-226-2646; charlesmoffett.com.



Al Black, "Untitled (Florida Highwaymen Painting)," from 1982. Charles Moffett Gallery

In the 1950s, the Florida Highwaymen, a collective of self-taught Black artists, developed a loosely unified aesthetic: luscious, Fauvist landscapes of subtropical Floridian splendor — skies streaked with claret, lambent marshes that seemed to achieve phosphorescence, and poincianas so red they threatened to combust. Led by Harold Newton and Alfred Hair, preternaturally gifted entrepreneurs who identified a market for both romantic naturalism and the kitschy Deco fantasy being practiced by South Beach hotels, they juiced their paintings with saturated color — the Hudson River School turned up to 11. Newton and Hair marshaled a group of two dozen amateurs that churned out ecstatic reveries, painting on roofing boards and framing them with baseboard scraps, carting them up and down Route 1 along the Florida coast, often unloading them before the paint was dry. The humidity radiates from their surfaces.

By all accounts, the Highwaymen were less interested in color theory or the canon than in making a living. The priority was volume. The quickness of the strokes are immediate — many of the compositions shade toward abstraction, slowing down just enough to allow for a windswept palm. Estimates place their output somewhere between 50,000 and 200,000 paintings. The 11 on view constitute a small, exhilarating taste of an inadequately recognized segment of American folk art.

This kind of painting used to be dismissed as “motel art,” but the legacy of the Highwaymen is not technical facility. It’s self-determination. Barred from gallery representation in the Jim Crow South, they willed their own market, carving out space in a world where they were otherwise unwelcome — art as a means of survival.

MAX LAKIN

Hugh Hayden

Through Aug. 13. Lisson Gallery, 504 West 24th Street, Manhattan; (212) 505 6431. lissongallery.com



Hugh Hayden's "Rapunzel" (2021), painted fiberboard, synthetic hair extensions and metal rim. Hugh Hayden and Lisson Gallery; Mark Waldhauser

A sinister streak runs through the work of Hugh Hayden. His precise, cleanly executed sculptures, evincing his training as an architect, are saturated with pointed critiques of prevailing American institutions. In "Huey," his third solo exhibition with Lisson Gallery, Hayden shows the outsized impact of two such institutions — organized religion and athletics — on Black identity and masculinity. Sparsely arranged across three rooms, the sculptures — all from 2021 — use a minimal but careful selection of materials to reinterpret familiar objects in a Gothic sensibility.

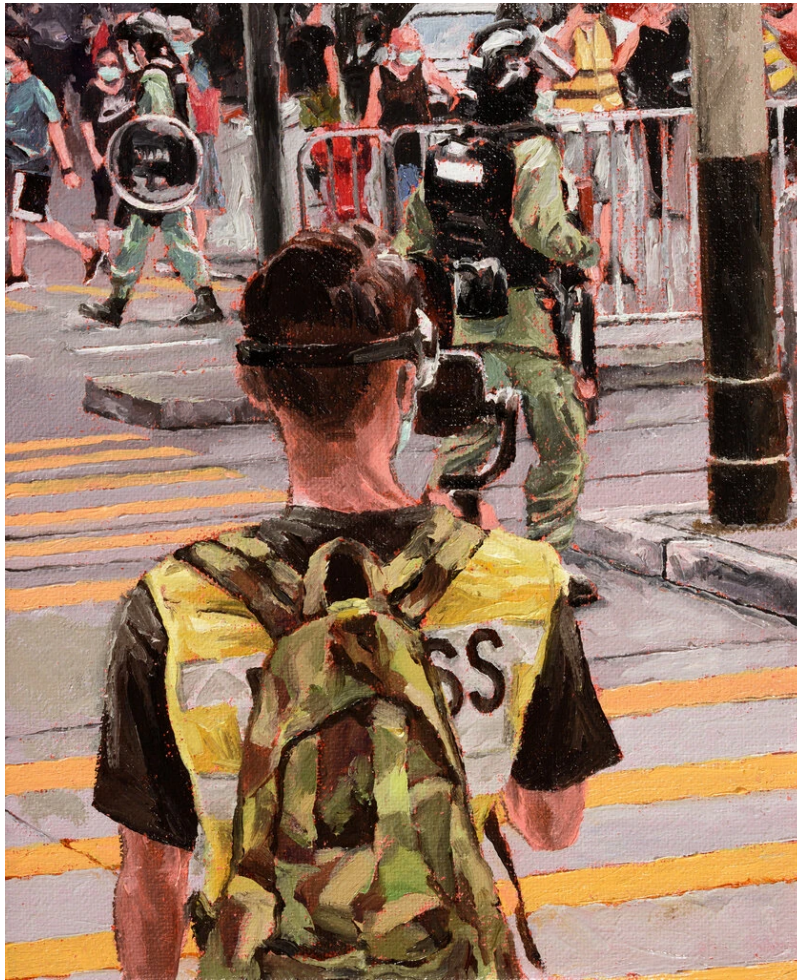
In the first gallery, visitors confront an installation of found church pews, refurbished and covered in red nylon bristles; mounted along the right wall are three hairbrushes made from white oak and boar hair, each bearing sharp, steel daggers as handles. These works, part of the series "Good Hair," refer to Hayden's experience growing up in the Christian church, with its strict regulations on outward appearance. In the adjoining room, Hayden continues this theme of discipline and ritual with a set of wall-mounted basketball nets fashioned from Gatorade-dyed rattan ("Fruity") and other organic fibers.

The final space features seven sculptures, carved from Texan and Gabon ebories. Though the slanted, skewed iterations of doors and chairs draw apt comparisons to the art of Robert Gober, they veer sharply from this legacy in their centering Black visual culture, as indicated by their surface color and the references in their titles — a small black gavel, titled "Uncle Phil," nods to James Avery's character on "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air." With this attention to detail, Hayden cinches his spot as a noteworthy figure in the lineage of American conceptualism.

TAUSIF NOOR

'The Protest and the Recuperation'

Through Aug. 14. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 615 West 129th Street, Manhattan; 212-853-1623, wallach.columbia.edu.



Chow Chun Fai's "Press," from the series "Portraits From Behind," 2020, Chow Chun Fai and Gallery Exit, Hong Kong

Protest — even when it floods social media and grinds cities to a halt — is ephemeral. Art allows it to endure. The work by 10 artists in “The Protest and the Recuperation,” including painting, sculpture and community performance, are at once expressions of solidarity with collective actions and attempts to articulate their significance.

Lara Baladi's “ABC: A Lesson in History” (2020), a grid of 30 black and white prints, draws from her collections of graffiti, cartoons and posters from the Tahrir Square protests of 2011, and of 1950s children's books used by military regimes to promote nationalistic values. This updated primer pairs Arabic words like “freedom,” “voice” and “memory” with images that encourage resistance over obedience. Nearby, 44 oil paintings from Chow Chun Fai's series “Portraits From Behind” chronicle the 2019-2020 pro-democracy uprisings in Hong Kong. Based on found snapshots, their expressive brushwork and intimate scale throw us into the fray. Taken during the 2019 women's march in Chile, a photo series by Eugenia Vargas-Pereira, “Tus ojos cuentan la historia (Your Eyes Tell the Story),” documents the embellished masks worn by demonstrators, which turned resistance to police surveillance into an opportunity to inject beauty into political action.

Sreshta Rit Premnath's “Kettling” (2021) is an elegant arrangement of steel crowd-control barriers, shiny emergency blankets and foam board; its title and materials refer to a dangerous police tactic for restraining crowds. It is a welcome reminder that despite the fierce hopefulness embodied by so much work on view, the language of art can be instrumentalized toward many ends.

ARUNA D'SOUZA

Correction: July 29, 2021

An earlier version of this article misstated the number of solo exhibitions Hugh Hayden has had with Lisson Gallery. It is three, not two. The phone number of the gallery was also incorrect. It is (212) 505 6431, not (212) 404 6431.