

ART & DESIGN

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By JASON FARAGO, MARTHA SCHWENDENER and WILL HEINRICH APRIL 5, 2018

‘Brush and Beyond’

Through April 28. Boers-Li Gallery, 24 East 81st Street, Manhattan; 917-472-7712, boersligallery.com.

After visiting Paris in the late 1920s, the trailblazing Chinese abstract painter Wu Dayu (1903-88) set up an art academy in Hangzhou, where Western and Chinese artistic pedagogies would be intertwined. Following the Communist revolution, his commitment to abstraction led to serious trouble; he was ousted from the academy to make way for Soviet-trained Socialist Realists, and during the Cultural Revolution, he painted in secret. Nine of Wu’s small, uncommon abstract paintings, all undated, are the principal reason to see this showcase of three Chinese artists, curated by Gao Minglu, the eminent Chinese art historian.

Wu’s vigorous, expressionistic improvisations often elided passages of figuration, especially of landscape. In one watercolor, believed to be from the 1950s, soft-edged triangles of navy and plum jostle with floral motifs in thickly daubed black. The painting recalls Qing-era landscape painters, like Wang Hui, as much as it echoes Kandinsky, Klee and Frankenthaler. Some hastily scribbled pastels from the end of Wu’s life appear frankly childlike, though a few, in their firmly slashed lines of orange or teal, display an aesthetic freedom that had few parallels in China before the reforms of Deng Xiaoping, who led China after Mao.

For Americans encountering these paintings in a New York gallery, it’s all too easy to assess them with the same handy tools we apply to modern Western

painting — to fall back on our assumptions that gestural abstraction was artistically, even politically, progressive in itself. But you can't just graft European and American aesthetics onto Chinese art history. In the context of the early People's Republic, the Socialist Realists, who drowned their individuality in murals of smiling farmers and strutting soldiers, were considered the vanguard. Wu, by contrast, faced denunciation for his commitment to abstraction; many of his paintings were destroyed.

Yet Wu's unorthodox liberty eventually offered a model to two living painters, both senior figures of contemporary Chinese abstraction, whose art is in the show. Two recent works by Yu Youhan, who was born in 1943 and was sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, feature large circles composed of thousands of short, sharp strokes. And splashy canvases by Zhang Wei, who was born in 1952, have a careless dynamism and personal idiosyncrasy that Wu would have appreciated. JASON FARAGO

Sara Magenheimer

Through April 15. New Museum, 235 Bowery, Manhattan; 877-500-1932, newmuseum.org.

Sara Magenheimer is like a poet who plies her craft in film and video rather than in words, although she makes sculpture and art in other media, too. The results are impressive in "NOON," her current show at the New Museum.

The title work is an installation that can be seen through the museum's front window. It includes video monitors and clothes on racks and breaks the word "noon" into "no" and "on," or combines it with other words and images of ticking clocks in various locales, prompting you to think about the artificial constructs imposed on time. Inside the museum, a series of videos ruminates further on temporality and sequencing, language and different forms of perception.

One of the strongest works is "Best Is Man's Breath Quality" (2017), in which the video's subject is a box jellyfish. This creature is extremely poisonous, and its sting is so toxic that one survivor described the pain as worse than that of natural childbirth or injuries from a car accident. Both spineless ("as if lacking a spine is weak") and translucent ("nothing to hide!"), the talking jellyfish persuasively challenges the human-defined hierarchy of species.

Other videos hinge on monologues and dialogues spoken by eerily familiar automated voices that ruminate on punctuation and abstract, philosophical ideas of language. Ms. Magenheimer's art often feels like Gertrude Stein's work set to music (in one video, an evocatively pitched-down PJ Harvey song) and juiced up with images, like those of deer captured by surveillance cameras, primates looking into a mirror installed in a forest, or a lone piece of luggage on an airport conveyor belt, accompanied by a voice-over describing loneliness and heartbreak.

Sometimes Ms. Magenheimer reaches too far, and the work is obscure and overly precious. Mostly, however, it is potent and poetic, beautifully, sparingly and surgically hitting the mark. MARTHA SCHWENDENER

'Sculpture'

Through April 14. Luhring Augustine, 531 West 24th Street, Manhattan; 212-206-9100, luhringaugustine.com. Through May. Luhring Augustine, 25 Knickerbocker Avenue, Brooklyn; 718-386-2746, luhringaugustine.com.

From Oscar Tuazon's tipped-over tripod of pebble-streaked concrete pipes to Reinhard Mucha's intricate, wall-mounted, picture-frame-like model of psychological avoidance, most of the **Bushwick** half of this adroit group show, curated by Julia Speed, isn't so much sculpted as built. **Simone Leigh's** fantastic "trophallaxis," a hanging bundle of nut-shaped, slate gray terra-cotta breasts, bristling with fully extended car antennas, may be an exception. But, in that case, the found antennas serve the same function as the unpainted plaster surface of the low white consoles in **Rachel Whiteread's** "Untitled (Double)" or the chunky base and welded black sutures on **Christopher Wool's** 11-foot-high loops of copper-plated steel: They call attention to the vast industrial system from which their components were drawn, making the whole into a kind of networked ready-made.

In **Chelsea**, Ms. Speed lets this critical material self-awareness blossom into a lighter kind of visual doubleness, seen in the 17 white plastic sawhorses of **Cady Noland's** wonderful, entirely found "Four in One Sculpture" and in Ms. Whiteread's "Untitled (Amber Floor)," an eight-foot-long section of waxy orange rubber whose end curls up, like a snub nose or an afterthought, against the wall. The apotheosis of this duality is **Roger Hiorns's** "Adolescent Torso" (2013), a Rolls-Royce Nimbus jet engine suspended vertically in a steel frame. It's

impossible to look at it, hanging as heavy and fresh as a glistening fish just pulled out of the ocean, without participating in the artist's own detached amusement.

WILL HEINRICH

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