

Janet Werner

ARSENAL CONTEMPORARY

“Crush,” featuring eighteen canvases made over the past two years, was a belated New York solo debut for prominent Montreal-based painter Janet Werner. Her earlier work often took the form of portraits—but imaginary ones, made without the use of real or photographic models. According to the artist, those paintings “actually came out of an investigation of abstraction.” Judging from reproductions, they certainly



Janet Werner, *Untitled (harlequin)*, 2022, oil on canvas, 69 × 52".

had nothing to do with realism, allowing painterliness its own impulses as it flirts with the grotesque. Later, she began mining fashion magazines for source material. That's well-trod territory for contemporary art, of course: The production of desire, the performance of gender, and the slippage between commercial culture and fine art have been recurring concerns for decades, from 1960s Pop, through the appropriation and Pictures art of the '80s, to the '90s fangirl fantasies of Karen Kilimnik and Elizabeth Peyton, and beyond. But Werner approaches this material in her own way, which is surprisingly—refreshingly—free of both polemical criticality and twee indulgence. In many ways, she is a profoundly traditional painter, having as much in common with, say, Manet as with her contemporaries. Every inch of the pieces on view here suggested that, and despite her gimlet eye for mass-market manipulations of femininity, she is more fascinated with what can come of the act of manipulating paint—more intent on producing pleasure than interrogating it, though interrogation can evidently be part of the pleasure.

In this exhibition, the apex of Werner's painterly bravura came in *Untitled (harlequin)*, 2022, whose imagery has been collaged, with deliberate imbalance, from two different sources. Most of the work's right side shows part of a woman's body, crouching toward the left. Her arms and head are out of the picture, and only one leg is visible. She wears a pink knee-high boot and a black dress with a rich floral pattern. She's situated in a nebulous greenish space, but one with some depth—we glimpse her shadow inside. The left side of the canvas and a portion of the bottom-right side present a fragment of someone standing, hand on hip, in a frilly, flouncy, long white gown, this time against a washy ochre ground with no implicit depth. Again, the head is outside the frame, and just one foot is seen. This section has been executed in an even looser manner than the right—it's wild, really. The acephalous painting refuses, as it were, to face the viewer, though the big ruffle at the shoulder of the frock seems to serve as a quasi-Surrealist substitute for the missing head of the woman in black. The image's parts slip in and out of relation to each other even as they illustrate different clothing styles and, through the models' stances—upright and stately versus dynamic and exuberant—contrasting ideals of being in the world. On the other hand, the two segments are painted not in contrasting ways but in two distinct variants of a flexible, fluid, and urgent pictorial handwriting that invests its consumerist subjects with immense energy while somehow also maintaining a certain neutrality toward them, at once earnest and sly. I can't help thinking of T. W. Adorno's famous

remark that mass culture and high art are “torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up.” For Werner, perhaps, not adding up *is* the freedom available for now. The instability of the picture does not undermine, but conveys, its *promesse de bonheur*.

—Barry Schwabsky

Nina Yankowitz

ERIC FIRESTONE GALLERY

Toward the end of the 1960s and into the early '70s, Nina Yankowitz was engaged with core questions about the nature of painting. Then an undergraduate student at New York's School of Visual Arts—at a time when two- and three-dimensional objects inhabited distinctly separate realms—she voiced a seditious desire to upend the binary: “I want to do both,” she told the head of SVA, according to her 2018 oral history interview for the Archives of American Art. In 1969, at age twenty-three, she had her first full-scale solo show at Manhattan's Kornblee Gallery (during a period when gallery representation for women was exceedingly rare), where she showed her series of “Draped Paintings,” 1967–72, ten of which were on view in her exhibition here. Freed from the stretcher and large in scale (two of them are more than ten feet high), the reconfigured works were imposing but not overpowering. Using sailboat canvas as her ground, she engaged both surface and space with a playful spirit of experimentation. She applied spray paint with varying degrees of saturation to make colorful abstractions; she then attached the works to the wall with staples, arranging them to accentuate their voluminous folds. In their most elegant iterations, such as the sunrise-hued *Goldie Lox*, 1968, which modulates from a sparingly pigmented left edge to a warmly saturated right, they married subtleties of color and form. Two pieces from Yankowitz's series of “Pleated Paintings,” 1970–72, also on view here, showed yet another way in which she pushed her experiments with three-dimensional form, adopting highly textured commercial pleating as an additional compositional tool. *Pleated Diptych*, 1972, revealed the complex compositions made possible by the combination of the folded substrate and spray, although its overall impact seemed more constrained than in the draped paintings.

In engaging the formal potential of the canvas itself, Yankowitz's works are closely related to contemporaneous pieces by some of her peers, including Harmony Hammond's accumulations of painted fabric strips from her “Presences” series, 1971–72, and Rosemary Mayer's airy draped fabric sculptures. All three artists unapologetically *took up space* in the gallery, their actions in this regard reflecting the urgency and priorities of the women's movement. Yet, of the three, Yankowitz in these years made art that had the most to do with *paint*, and with exploring what it could do, what effects it could produce. Take *Sagging Spiro*, 1969, whose title pokes fun at the limp physiognomy of Richard Nixon's vice president, Spiro T. Agnew, and which combined various saturations of spray paint—some of

Nina Yankowitz, *Sagging Spiro*, 1969, sprayed acrylic on canvas, 10' 5" × 5' 1".

