

ART REVIEWS

New York Galleries: What to See Right Now

Pierre Soulages's astonishing black monochromes; Alma Thomas's vibrant abstractions; Elaine Cameron-Weir's sculptures; and photographing 'the criminal type.'

Oct. 9, 2019, 11:22 a.m. ET

Pierre Soulages

Through Oct. 26. Lévy Gorvy, 909 Madison Avenue, Manhattan; 212-772-2004, levygorvy.com.

This December, around the time he turns 100, the French painter Pierre Soulages will be the subject of a retrospective at the Louvre, making him the third living artist ever to show there. (The others were Picasso and Chagall.)

Working in black monochrome since the 1960s, Mr. Soulages has built an astonishing range of paintings. Dizzily high-concept but resolutely material, they're consistently inventive but laser-focused on a single key insight — and if you can't make it to Paris, you can watch this insight unfold in "Pierre Soulages: A Century" at New York's own Lévy Gorvy Gallery. (The show also makes an extraordinary complement to the equally monochrome Vija Celmins retrospective across the street, which Roberta Smith recently called "quietly ravishing.")

It starts with "Peinture 195 x 130 cm, 20 Novembre 1956," a tall, dirty-white canvas covered in overlapping bars of black oil paint. Any one of these bars, by itself, could hold your attention as an expressive gesture. But altogether, arranged in three horizontal rows that evoke crossed-out writing, they're too complex to parse. Instead of resting in the middle, as it normally would, your gaze is forced into the corners.

The slick, diagonal, black-on-black strokes of "Peinture 100 x 73 cm, 13 Octobre 1958" suggest speed, transparency and lightning. And in "Peinture 125 x 202 cm, 30 Octobre 1958," the artist sets another dense array of heavy black strokes alongside a diffuse ocher cloud. If you stand to the left of the painting, the black strokes will rise up to meet you and the ocher will obligingly fade back. If you stand to the right, the black will fade and the ocher will rise. From head-on, though, what you see is a pair of opposites balanced too neatly to resolve.



From left, “Peinture 202 x 163 cm, 30 Septembre 1963”; “Peinture 81 x 60 cm, 28 Février 1955”; and “Peinture 202 x 143 cm, 29 Septembre 1967.”

Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; Tom Powel Imaging

All these contradictions and reversals freight the artist’s gestural paintings with an infinite shadow of evocative self-consciousness. The most extreme examples of this effect come in his “Outrenoir” series, which use thick ridges of jet-black paint with a surface so slick it’s reflective. Under gallery lights, they seem designed to produce floating patterns of white glare.

The most recent piece in the show, “Peinture 202 x 143 cm, 5 Avril 2019,” is a 6½-foot-high wall of tarry black playing host to 10 crowded rows of chunky vertical strokes. That is, they’re shapes that read, at first, as brush strokes. But they’re really just impressions, places where Mr. Soulages’s brush has pressed a shape into paint that was already there, and this double valence pushes you out of your ordinary mode of seeing even as it pulls you in. If the opposite of a painting is also a painting, what ground are we standing on?

But for me, the heady inversions reach their most shocking in “Peinture 202 x 163 cm, 30 Septembre 1963,” in which Mr. Soulages scraped a white tornado into marine-blue paint and then largely covered the same space over again with flat black. Standing in front of the canvas feels like experiencing a momentary loss of vision. Until my eyes adjusted, and the blue edges reappeared, I couldn’t see anything at all. It was only a perceptual gap, and it only lasted for an instant, but I couldn’t help gasping at all the transcendent mysteries just such an opening might contain. *WILL HEINRICH*

Alma Thomas

Through Oct. 19. Mnuchin Gallery, 45 East 78th Street, Manhattan; 212-861-0020, mnuchingallery.com.



Alma Thomas's "Springtime in Washington," from 1971, at Mnuchin Gallery. Tom Powel Imaging

Alma Thomas's multihued abstract paintings are so vibrant and human, it's hard not to get from them an infectious joy. But upon seeing her exhibition, "Resurrection," at Mnuchin Gallery, I was struck by a duality of sorts: It's both a perfect and an anachronistic moment for her work.

Perfect because the mainstream art world has been catching up to her. Ms. Thomas (1891-1978) was the subject of a traveling retrospective in 2016 and will be featured in another one planned for 2020. What's more, abstraction by African-American artists like Ms. Thomas has finally begun to receive long-overdue attention.

At the same time, her tessellated processions of color are all about beauty — a quality that seems almost archaic today as a measure of worth for art. Basking in the hypnotizing, rainbow-like concentric circles of "Springtime in Washington" (1971) can feel like a guilty pleasure.

But for Ms. Thomas, an art teacher who took up painting full time after retiring in 1960 — and was the first black woman to have a solo show at the Whitney Museum, when she was 80 — the pleasure of transmuting the world into saturated, carefully patterned brush strokes was hard-won. Working in decades rife with political and social upheaval, beauty may have seemed in short supply. Her rebellion was to never lose sight of it. *JILLIAN STEINHAUER*

Elaine Cameron-Weir

Through Oct. 27. JTT, 191 Chrystie Street, Manhattan; 212-574-8152, jtt NYC.com.



Two sculptures by Elaine Cameron-Weir feature large glass lenses cradled in rubber-backed concrete blankets and surrounded by neon lighting. Elaine Cameron-Weir and JTT, New York; Isabel Asha Penzlien

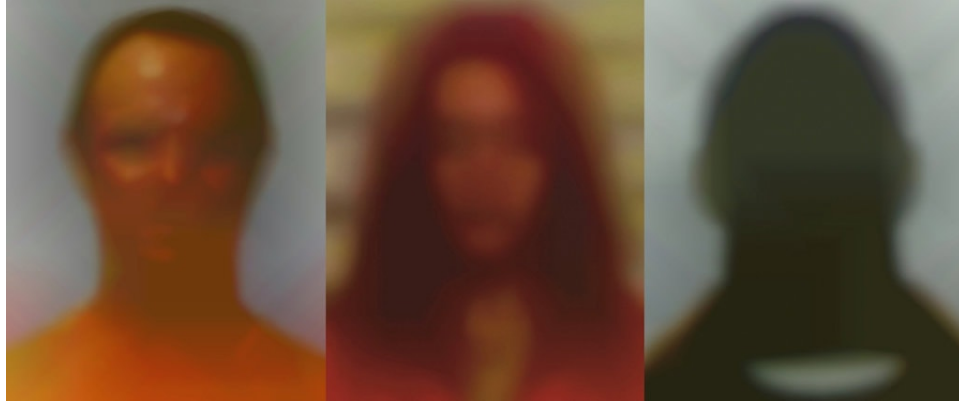
It seems contradictory that medieval fashion and tools could also be futuristic, but movies and television shows and films like “Game of Thrones” and the “Mad Max” franchise exploit this formula. Similarly, Elaine Cameron-Weir’s sculptures in “Strings That Show the Wind” at JTT conjure both medieval Europe and a stylish but potentially dystopian future.

Vertical sculptures hanging from the ceiling or suspended like flayed skins on the wall are made of chain mail with sharp hooks, rawhide and small burning candles attached to them. In several sculptures, round metal plates are embossed with seashells or miniature figurines and look like fossils or ancient zodiac dials. Two hunks of polished green fluorite, a mineral popular in the world of healing crystals, sit on chained steel trolleys. These aspects of the show suggest a medieval alchemist’s workshop — or perhaps gothic aspects of the artist’s deep northern origins, since she is from Red Deer, Alberta (which is also a center for petrochemical production).

Other works, however, are more future-oriented. Two sculptures feature large glass lenses cradled in rubber-backed concrete blankets and surrounded by bright neon lighting. The floor has been covered with modular steel tiles, like the sub-flooring used in offices and computer server farms. Mingling technology “solutions” with crystals, and media communications with folkloric energy and healing materials, Ms. Cameron-Weir has concocted a glamorous but slightly paranoid science fiction in which past, present and future are effectively compressed. *MARTHA SCHWENDENER*

‘The Criminal Type’

Through Nov. 16. Apexart, 291 Church Street, Manhattan; 212-431-5270, apexart.org.



For his “Obscurity” project, from 2016, Paolo Cirio blurred images found on mug-shot websites and scrambled the associated data. via apexart

There’s one particularly remarkable picture in “The Criminal Type.” Taken by the social documentary photographer Jacob Riis around 1895, it shows a bearded man being restrained by four men in suits, while a fifth looks on. The overseer is Thomas Byrnes, New York City’s chief of detectives who implemented the process of photographing not just convicted criminals but suspects as well. The ragged character who struggles in the frame doesn’t want to have his picture taken.

Even in the 19th century, that man knew: Photography is not simply an objective tool but a mechanism of control. This small but important exhibition examines how those in power have long used the medium to decide who looks like a criminal, and how such determinations have often been bound up with prejudicial, pseudoscientific theories.

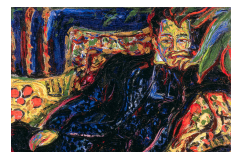
The curator, Elizabeth Breiner, begins with historical images and information, including what are believed to be the earliest photographs of American slaves. She then brings her inquiry into the present day with a mix of artistic, activist and journalistic work — projects like Paolo Cirio’s “Obscurity” (2016), which copied, jumbled and reposted information from contemporary mug-shot websites to disrupt their dubious practices; Zora J. Murff’s “Corrections” photographs (2013-15), made while tracking juveniles on probation; and a ProPublica study of risk-assessment software used in court. Together they paint a damning picture of a broken modern system built on old biases. *JILLIAN STEINHAUER*

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