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'The Painter of Modern Life' at Anton Kern Gallery

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Art in Review

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Given its title, taken from an essay by Baudelaire, you might suppose that “The Painter of Modern Life” would offer an alternative to the abstract and conceptually self-reflexive approaches to painting that are so prevalent today. But while it’s a lively and engaging show, it doesn’t have a lot to do with life as ordinarily construed. Organized by the independent curator Bob Nickas, it presents more than 70 works by 21 artists, most of whom focus on formal and procedural aspects like surfaces, shapes, repetition, color and sensually assertive materials.

The exhibition includes numerous veterans. Joanne Greenbaum’s dissonantly beautiful paintings of densely layered scribbles and smears convey states of heightened creative excitement. A black and white Op Art-style painting by Wayne Gonzales is composed of round shapes like portholes that mysteriously glow. Stanley Whitney’s painting of colorful rectangles arranged like books on shelves is a blast of optical hedonism. Among relative newcomers, Chip Hughes and Richard Tinkler produce finely grained patterns that seem products of monastic devotion.

Representational painting isn’t entirely absent. “Pilgrim,” by Alex Brown, appears abstract up close but from a distance resolves into the image of a longhaired, bearded hippie seen as if through patterned shower glass. Sascha Braunig makes spooky, neo-Surrealistic portraits of imaginary people from illusory tubular elements and geometric patterns.

As for modern life, Mathew Cerletty’s pellucid image of an edition of the Yellow Pages floating on swimming pool-blue water is incisive: It’s a parable about obsolescence, a condition to which painting has yet to succumb and possibly never will as long as humans are around to do it.