

ARTNEWS

CUTTING A FINE FIGURE: AROUND NEW YORK

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On shows at the Whitney Museum, Hester, Subal, Feuer/Mesler, Beauchene, Hanley, Luxembourg & Dayan, Zwirner, and Canada



Mathew Cerletty, *Shelf life*, 2015, oil on canvas, 50" x 60". Whitney Museum.

For what seems like ages, New York's galleries have been awash in abstract painting of the bland and derivative variety. But the past few years have seen the emergence of a batch of exciting young figurative painters who, though their concerns are varied, share a number of intriguing characteristics: they are attuned to humor (slapstick looms large), fixated on the body, rapacious in their mining of both art history and the broader culture (from TV to Internet memes), and most of all, determined to impart pleasure. Lately it has felt like this particular mode of representation—slick, punchy, and outré—is cresting over into something like a movement, or at least a moment.

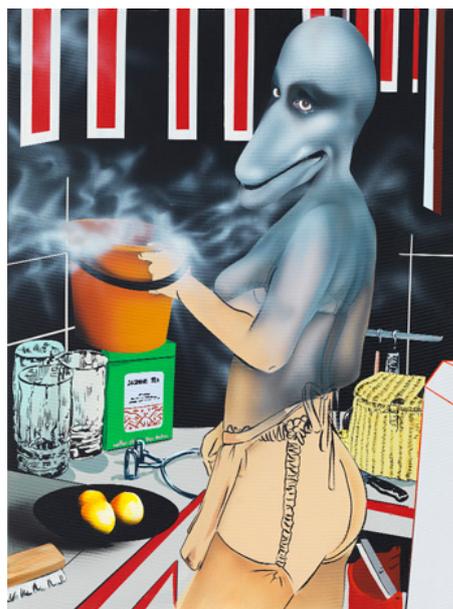
"Flatlands" at the **Whitney Museum** (January 14–April 17) brings together five closely watched painters working in diverse, distinct ways within that fertile zone: Nina Chanel Abney, Mathew Cerletty, Jamian Juliano-Villani, Caitlin Keogh, and Orion Martin. Impressively au courant, the show is a smart, concise affair organized by Whitney curators Laura Phipps and Elisabeth Sherman. "Today, the virtual hyperconnectivity of our daily lives masks a disconnect from the physical world,

leading to a yearning for the tactile,” they write in a cautious essay. “Representational art answers this desire to be tethered to reality at a time when the world around us feels so insecure.” That is not to say that the painted worlds depicted here feel safe. These artists take up the language of the screen—flattened, polished, even corporate—and use it toward dangerous ends. Meaning is in disarray, contested, in their scenes. All hell is breaking loose.

Employing high-key color, a subtly cartoon-influenced approach to rendering shapes and spaces, and a heroic attention to detail, Cerletty imparts startling uncanniness to seemingly quotidian objects and scenes. In the immaculately rendered *Shelf Life* (2015), the star of the show, he places the viewer inside a fish tank, amid fish and seaweed. He’s also contributed paintings of a richly sequined vest and a moonlit field, this last something like a Ralph Albert Blakelock turned into a kitsch screensaver—which is to say that, like many of his compatriots, Cerletty happily, giddily brushes aside any sense of good taste. (The flattening in the show’s title is multivalent.)

Martin, perhaps the least established figure here, shares Cerletty’s zest for singular, potent images that expose the surrealism and sublimity lurking just beneath the surface of the everyday. His paintings also begin with ostensibly straightforward things—a tightly laced, high-heeled boot, a taut configuration of ropes—but he amps them up with precise details and sly moves in the direction of abstraction. They recall what William N. Copley (a lodestar for many in this gang) referred to as “ridiculous objects”: items that take on erotic, libidinal attributes through obsessive examination. Martin’s works are filled with holes, laces, knots. Concerned with penetration, vulnerability, and bondage, they prick and thrill.

Juliano-Villani and Keogh are in a camp concerned with sharp juxtapositions, crisply splicing together disparate subjects in the same painting, though the former artist handily outmatches the latter. Keogh works big in acrylic, rendering concatenations of images—a skeleton in a book, flowers, and garlands in one piece here—in an ultra-flat coloring-book style, which is decorative and polite and which also, I am sorry to say, quickly grows monotonous. In contrast, Juliano-Villani, wielding an airbrush, makes wild scenes that overflow with impossible-to-place references and styles. In one, a man made of orange-and-white traffic cones bounds over a patch of rocks. In another, a teddy bear sits behind the club-secured steering wheel of a car. Her paintings serve up punch lines, even while radiating delicious evil.



Jamian Juliano-Villani, *Stone Love*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 30" x 25". Whitney Museum.

OFFICE BAROQUE

Abney's unlikely muse is Stuart Davis at his most colorful and syncopated. She is represented by a single sprawling painting divided into four panels, in which naked women—black and white—bend over to expose themselves, while buzzy shapes and words—"NO," "YES," "HOES"—dance about their bodies. It is a startling piece—the blocky, almost childlike writing clashing with the frank nudity—and could be read, perhaps, as a depiction of digital space at its most brusque, clogged with pornography, comments, and orders.

Bodies are everywhere in this ascendant imagist mode, but they are never fixed or stable. They are under attack, being torn apart, morphing into something else, or evanescing.