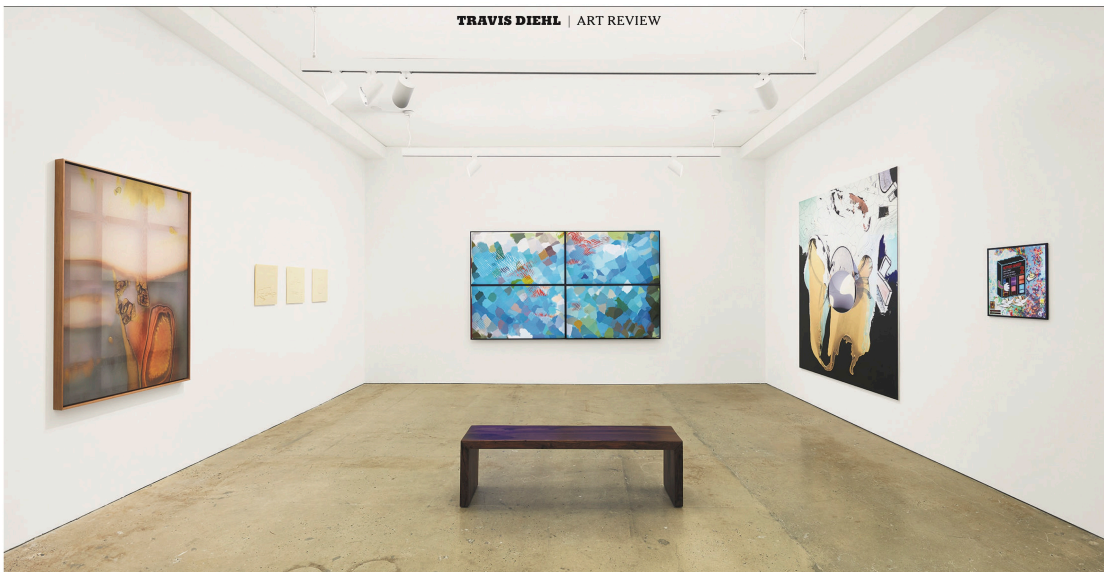


Fine Art

TRAVIS DIEHL | ART REVIEW



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM POWELL IMAGING

When Tradition Meets Technology

Nahmad Contemporary ponders the meaning of art through work in new media.

EVERY NEW GENERATION of artists, curators and critics seems to feel the need to defend painting. It makes sense: Paint on canvas, good for little else, is basically synonymous with big-A Art. Painting stands for art's angels and demons, its optimism and attention, its arrogance and solipsism.

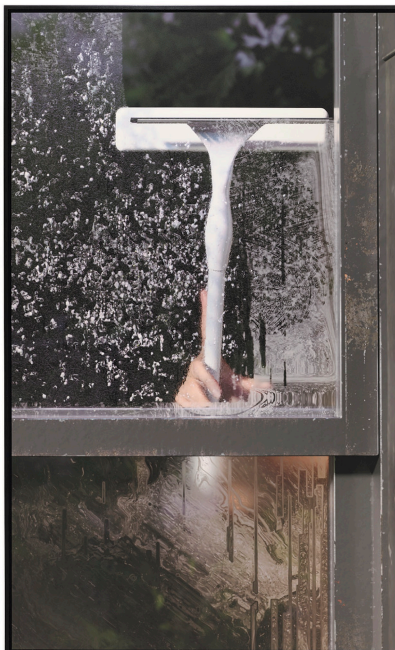
"The Painter's New Tools" at Nahmad Contemporary in Manhattan showcases how far contemporary artists have pushed new media without leaving the safety of what's legible as art. Gathering 57 works by 31 creators, its curators, Eleanor Cayre and Dean Kissick, assert that new technologies have irrevocably redefined what it means to paint, while maintaining that painting remains defined by the pursuit of beautiful things. Trying to hold both ideas at once, the show embodies the cryptic, ambivalent embrace of tradition, from cottagecore farm life to Catholicism, practiced by a subset of mostly young, very-online culturalati. Painting is at stake — and so is a conservative desire for the old avant-garde.

It's true that painting is technology, and always has been. Just as the invention of oil paint, slower drying than tempera, gave artists a revolutionary range of new effects, the lens and the transistor — photography, video, and computer graphics — brought profound, irreversible changes to how artists, and the rest of us, see the world.

The hovering brush strokes and vertiginous layering of an emerald Laura Owens canvas apotheosize Photoshop techniques. Ei Arakawa's homage to Owens hangs nearby: an image of one of her paintings displayed on a low-res tapestry of LEDs. In a cutting-edge anatomical study by the video artist Kate Cooper, the camera skitters through a digital model of a human body, slice by slice, like Leonardo playing with an MRI machine.

Cayre and Kissick make a thorough survey of painting's ongoing identity crisis, whether or not the artists themselves feel like they're painting. The show is conceptually bound on one side by artists departing from conventional painting into digital territory, and on the other by artists making animations and unpainted objects, shoe-horned into painting's company because they go on the wall.

Representing those trying new tools is the painter Julien Nguyen, who has a reputation for applying Renaissance methods to contemporary idioms. His digital portrait of a winsome youth smoking in the tub ditches brush and palette for an iPad. The strokes Nguyen laid down on the screen appear on a



JESSICA WILSON, VIA ERMES/SHIMIZU GALLERY

Top, an installation view from "The Painter's New Tools," with Ezra Miller's "Imago," 2022, on four screens, at center. Above, Jessica Wilson, "Perfectly Clear" (After Sensory Primer), 2022; and Wade Guyton, "Untitled," 2021.

monitor, installed front and center, as a flurry of oily, paint-like marks.

For the latter, there's Jordan Wolfson's pixelated print of Dorothy and her companions in Oz. The outdoorsy, eaved frame is aggressively styled with hearts, crosses and a Star of David pendant as well as devotional blurbs like "Surrender to God." The

words "GOD IS GOD IS GOD IS..." crawl around the border. Despite employing no paint, the untitled piece combines several of the medium's conventional themes: Christian hagiography; homage to predecessors (namely Ashley Bickerton, a leading assemblage artist of the '80s); and enough logorrheic confidence to make an abstract

expressionist blush.

Kissick is a New York critic whose regular column in Spike Art Magazine skips like a stone between the classical and the ultra-modern — from, say, contemplating a Fragonard to musing on NFTs (non-fungible tokens), all without ever leaving the Frick Madison. Cayre is an independent art adviser specializing in the 1950s to today. Both have a stake in the contemporary — what it means to live now, not then.

Newness isn't always progress. "Imago" (2022) by Ezra Miller — an artist, art director and web developer — is a washy abstraction evolving in real time on a grid of four monitors that looks like driving into a rainy Monet with the wipers off. A distracting black cross runs through the center of the image where the screens meet. Up close, what emerges isn't brush strokes but

The Painter's New Tools

Through Sept. 24 at Nahmad Contemporary, 980 Madison Ave., Manhattan; nahmadcontemporary.com.

the black gaffer's tape covering the seams. Give me a dusty Rothko over a new-media experiment whose physical presence seems slapped together and reluctant.

Speaking of Rothko: "Disc Buddie #4448," an NFT by Tojiba CPU Corp, manifests on a screen: a rough digital cartoon of a thick floppy disk with white hands and doves for shoes, the words "Rothko Maker 2" on its face. NFT projects like this one, which generate thousands of unique pictures by combining sets of traits, push the idea that art should be easy and repeatable. Let the old guard whine about bad taste. This is "the new painting" in that even ugly paintings can be good investments.

Beauty is still possible, of course — the exhibition includes heady, wall-winning abstractions by Seth Price, who wrings painterly gestures from industrial processes; Wade Guyton, who paints by abusing inkjet printers; or delicate, moiré surfaces by Jacqueline Humphries or Anicka Yi. These are among the smartest updates of painting's tendency to talk to itself and ignore the wider world. The tone here is devotional, not iconoclastic.

The odd urgency of the age condenses in a 2022 picture by Jessica Wilson, "Perfectly Clear" — a nearly photorealistic 3-D rendering of a hand drawing a squeegee down a sudsy windowpane. It's a flat UV print on Dibond and one of the least painterly objects in the show. Yet its tart composition, our view from the outside, the scintillating tactility of the blade scraping away the soap, remind us that the medium doesn't matter. What matters is art's basic urge to exceed the chore of living.



JORDAN WOLFSON, VIA DAVID ZWISNER



KATE COOPER



WADE GUYTON, VIA MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY