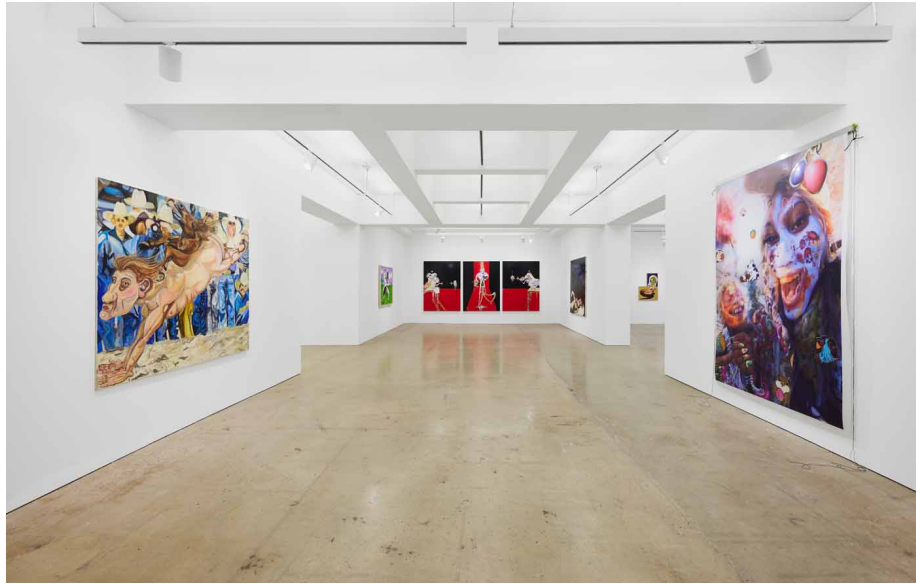


Ugly painting: The dialectic of painterly style and pictorial content

Installation view, "Ugly Painting" at Nahmad Contemporary, New York, NY

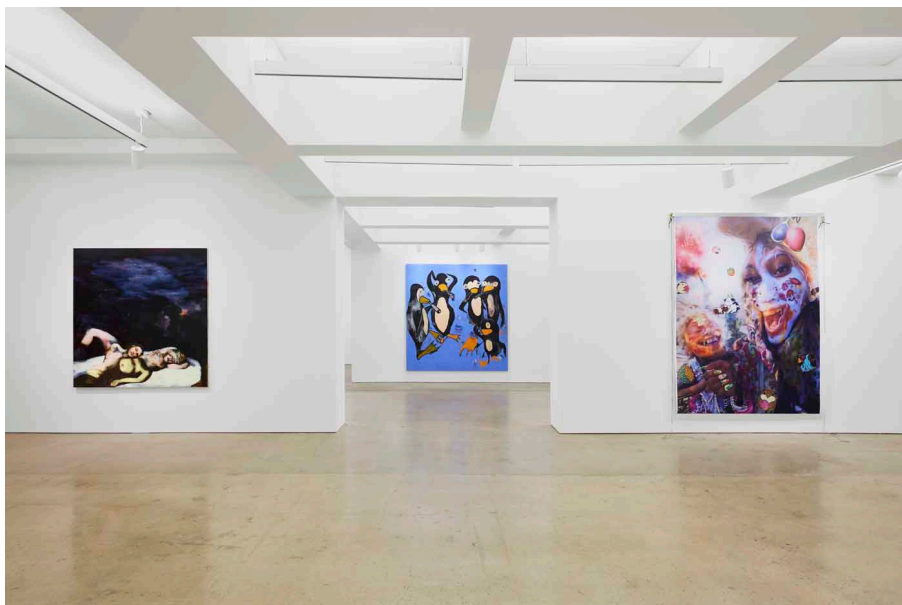
By **EKIN ERKAN**, August 29th, 2023

“Ugly Painting” is an eclectic summer group show at [Nahmad Contemporary](#) curated by Eleanor Cayre and Dean Kissick, features over two dozen contemporary artists. The artists articulate their divergent approaches to such painting in short statements posted alongside their work. The primary anchor to the exhibition is Marcia Tucker’s conception of “bad painting”, which gets at ugliness in a mode that is open to jarring styles and subjects yet all the while avoiding “amateurish jabs”; that is, this approach to “ugly painting” is technically competent. Some of the artists on view see ugliness as liberatory while others consider beauty and ugliness to be conjoined concepts, with the insignificant, beastly, or mundane embodying qualities as worthy of artistic attention as the sensuously pleasing. The most direct and literal visual approaches to the ugly involve representations of grotesque varmint and human-like amalgams, such as Jana Euler's *Rider/horse switch under observation ride thrown off*, Connor Marie's *Pork*, and Jared Madere's *You gotta speak with the new generation they crazy* – three of the exhibition’s most successful works. Except for a few outliers such as Benjamin Reichwald and Jonas Rönnerberg's *Vila i frid, T centralen*, the works in this exhibition are dexterously executed, suggesting that the kind of ugliness implored has less to do with naïve or what Tucker termed “de-skilled” painterly prowess. The ugliness on view is rarely the product of a subversive artist intentionally slighting painterly principles. Rather, it usually results from what Rachel Wetzler – quoted in the exhibition press statement – calls “sheer painterly competence.”



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For instance, Madere's AI painting, rendered with machine learning-based image synthesis techniques, is honed and brilliantly generated, with two grinning figures featuring nebulous, baggy, organ-like sulks and protrusions; the figures are dotted in emoticons of pineapples, cows, and chipmunks. The latter, which resemble text message "stickers", are a clear nod towards the vernacular and machinations of the contemporary internet. The crisp "ugliness" here is of same stripe as the bleeding, fuchsia-cast lighting postmodern quotation that Harmony Korine employed in his Disney teen cast-studded film *Spring Breakers*: a cheeky, self-aware ugliness born of ironic remove rather than painterly ineptitude. As such, Madere's painting is also in keeping with the history of the ugly painting as inaugurated by Titian's manure-bedaubed mannerism (e.g., his 1575 painting *The Flaying of Marsyas*), advanced by Goya's late-career *pinturas negras*, and culminating in the work of late twentieth-century German artists including Jörg Immendorff, Martin Kippenberger, and Albert Oehlen. This ugliness, then, is part of a unique art historical genealogy. While it may often take a post-modern turn with Korine and Madere's culturally timely appropriations, it is arguably a pre-modern rite.



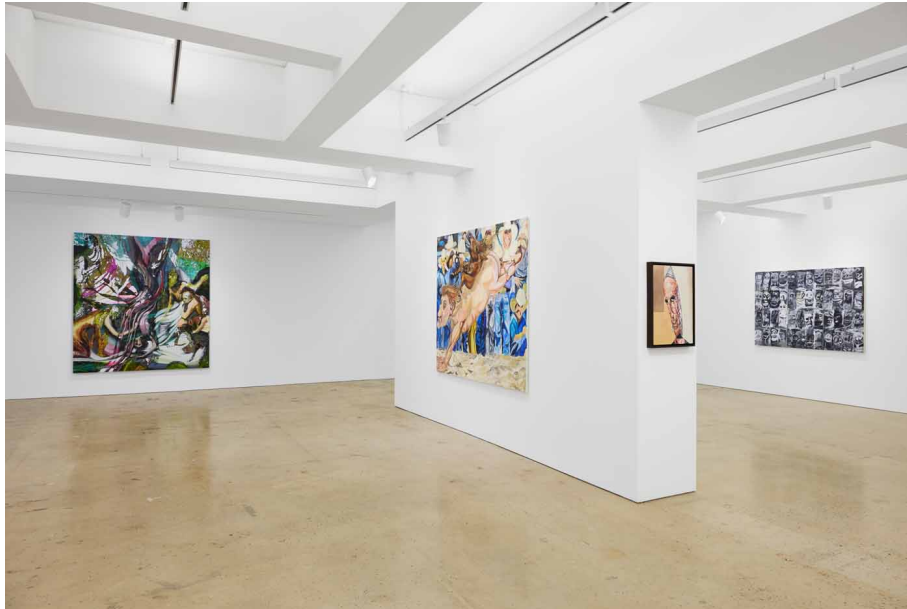
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Careful consideration reveals that this art history is animated by a dialectic of both content *and* form, two mutually reinforcing poles that consist in is *what* is depicted and the style in which it is depicted. Despite stressing the latter aspect (viz., style), Cayre and Kissick’s mention of representation in their definition of “ugliness” in painting acknowledges this inextricable dialectic. It is laudable that the exhibition prompts such subtle considerations on behalf of the considerate percipient, particularly in an epoch in which contemporary figurative painting so often threatens to lapse into a simplistic caricature of the Aristotelean aesthetic framework that equates moral virtue with the beautiful. Artists like Kehinde Wiley frequently make use of lavish Art Nouveau backgrounds and figurative beautification in the service of this stance, concealing the putatively ugly dimensions of power for fear of threatening its more politically ingrained incarnations.



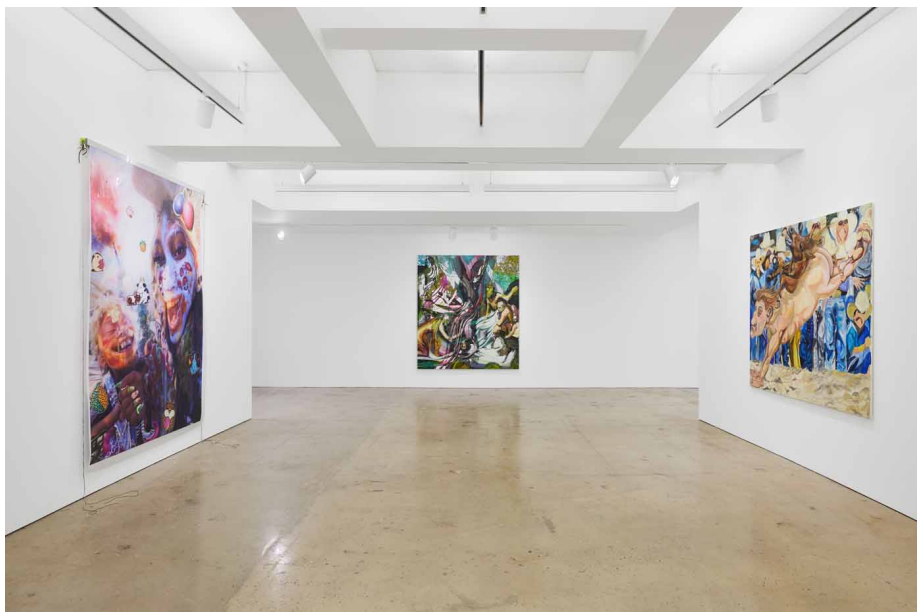
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Kissick intimates that he is most interested in is ugliness as a crude stylistic attribute that should be able to stand alone, though he also notes that there are varying degrees of ugliness on display. Even in some of the more narrative works, the slapdash bleary stroke and flamboyant palette, both telling attributes of such stylistic ugliness, can be isolated. An example is Mathieu Malouf’s untitled piece, a jocular appropriation of Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*, in which bug-eyed penguins smoke, their smudged, traffic-cone orange beaks gawking. Yet the true ugliness in Malouf’s work has less to do with its stylistic import—rather, it is a byproduct of the droll appropriation of Picasso and its coeval onslaught of artworld pomp. Still, the exhibition is at its most satisfyingly vulgar when the errant smudge does not take on its own life and instead infiltrates pictorial content, goaded by the appropriative spirit. This is manifest in the crackled fuchsia rummages in Alex Carver’s *The Painting Flays Itself* coiling over the menagerie of seated figures. Carver’s work is a third-order appropriation, the source material being Titian’s painterly transfiguration of Ovid’s *The Metamorphoses*. The moral tale tells of Apollo’s skinning Marsyas, the lesser-skilled satyr musician bested and thus violently peeled by Apollo.



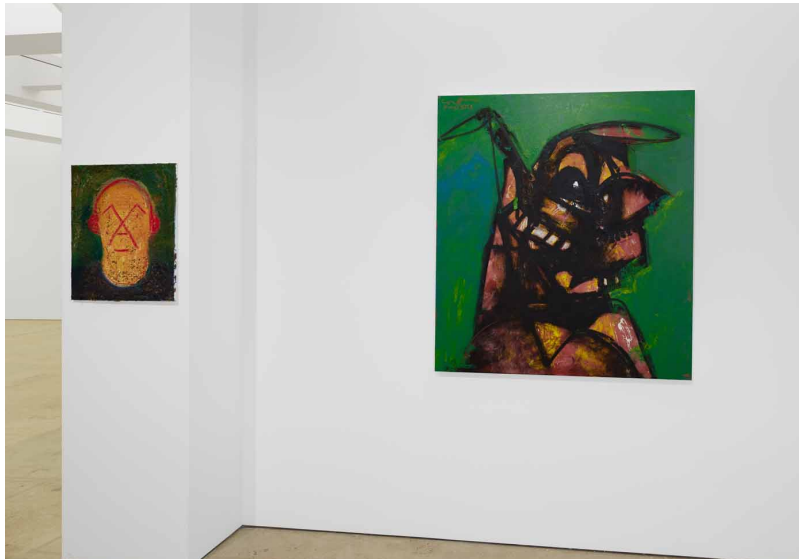
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In keeping with the dialectic, of course, ugliness remains tethered to what is being narrated or signified as well as discrete visible features. No errant trace exists in a vacuum, for this would hardly be the kind of ugliness that Kissick and Cayre are interested in. It would, instead, be simply incompetent painting, which would make for an altogether different show. Were the exhibition seeking to showcase ugliness-as-style exclusively, the curators would have done well to present exclusively abstract works. Yet this would soon inevitably slip into a showing of the de-skilled. The curators are thus tasked with a delicate balancing act. To their credit, they ponder ugly painting as a more nuanced representational phenomenon, often manifested in figuration. Among the recurrent figurative motifs is the acerbic cartoonery in Carroll Dunham's *Clouds (2)*. Floating hirsute phalluses amplify the wrestlers' homoerotic play as they barrel down rolling verdant hills. Frisky and good-natured, Carroll's painting is less affecting than the aforementioned works, the ugliness of conceptual riches here compromised.



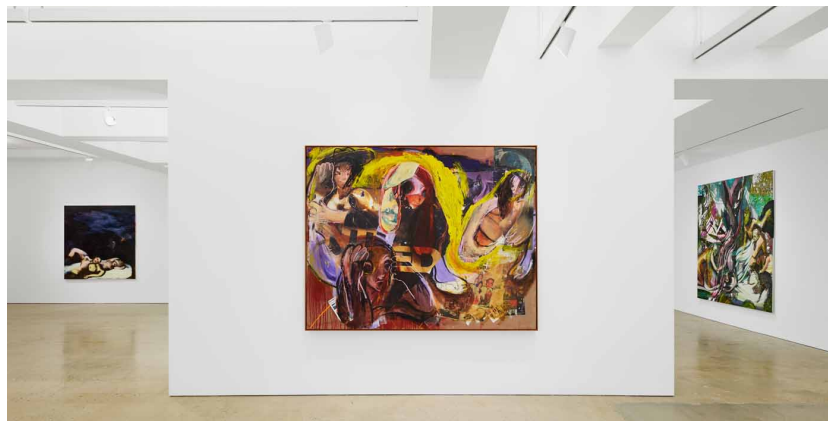
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The show also explores gaudiness, a key exemplar being Takashi Murakami's *Homage to Francis Bacon (RED + BLACK Triptych)*. After Titian and Goya, Bacon is perhaps the third main bulwark of the ugly painting, famously employing vertical scores to echo the eponymous Pope's haunting bellows in *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*. Murakami's contribution to the show dissolves Bacon's *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* into flat, crimson-and-black planes, crystallizing his diaphanous morphological forms into resplendent, amorphous, beady-eyed anime figures. The work is overwhelmingly pleasurable to view, Murakami's supposed ugliness being neo-classically sumptuous. This shows that mere appropriation is not sufficient to prod the ugliness that the more successful paintings get at.



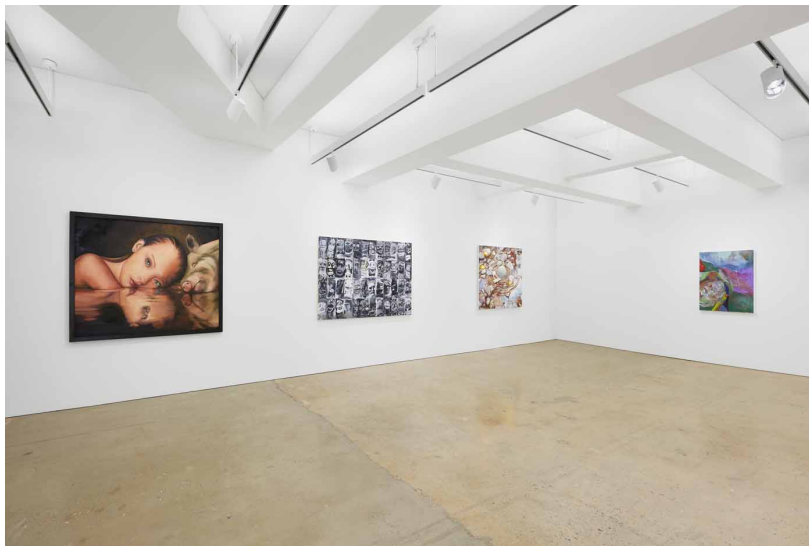
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George Condo's toothy, titular dentist in *The Mad Dentist*, one of the smaller paintings on display, beams a craven smile, forehead and shoulders collapsed as they might be in an analytic Cubist study. The painting raises the central tension in the show: that, despite its ostensible sidelining of the moral stakes in ugliness, they are irrepressible. Condo's accompanying text asks us to think about Kant's treatise on aesthetics. For Kant, Condo notes, "beauty is that which pleases without interest. It's such an interesting statement. But what is ugly? Ugly can sometimes serve a purpose for humanity that betters it. Behind the mask of beauty, it is often very ugly, and behind the mask of ugly is often very beautiful and humble and soulful."



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Yet Kant is indeed enlightening regarding judgments of taste about ugliness. In the *Critique of Judgment*, he observes that “the concept of perfection as objective purposiveness has nothing at all to do with the feeling of pleasure.” The same disinterestedness with which we formulate judgments of beauty informs our judgments of ugliness. They do not require comparative reference to an ideal of perfection. Philosopher Paul Guyer notes that, for Kant, “judgements of ugliness are not purely reflective aesthetic judgements at all, but are merely sensory or else practical judgements – that is, they involve expressions of our feelings of displeasure at things that are disagreeable in some physiological or psychological way ... or bad or evil in the light of our prudential or moral practical reason.” This explains how the moral can be bound up in the putatively ugly as it is in the beautiful. Kant comments that “the furies, diseases, devastations of war, and the like can, as harmful things, be very beautifully described, indeed even represented in painting.” Notably, for Kant our “pure judgement[s] of beauty” are also judgments of the proper or correct expression of an aesthetic idea, which are signaled by the feeling generated by our imagination when it notices purposiveness or finality. They cannot be formulated as rules and are devoid of conceptual content, blindly detected. When an artwork expresses a moral aesthetic idea, it then no longer is an ugly painting regardless of what is interpreted. This is how an ugly painting can become a beautiful artwork.



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In Madere’s piece – to my mind, the most riveting one on display – moral repugnance is embedded in aesthetic beauty. While machine learning has distorted his humanoid figures and perhaps prompts our revulsion, we also come to a gratifying understanding of the human condition – a moment of recognition. The quintessential “ugly painting” and arguably painting in general does not have artistic value *because* it is beautiful or ugly but for other reasons, often closely related to narrative content or socio-historical context. This exhibition clarifies this aesthetic lesson on value reception. In refusing to reduce ugly painting to an artificially simplistic or univocal concept, and despite a few middling trifles, this show prompts a rare kind of philosophical introspection. **WM**

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