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Joanne Greenbaum's Beautiful Monsters

by John Yau on April 6, 2014



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Joanne Greenbaum is hellbent on making each painting different from the ones preceding it. This was immediately evident when I walked into her first exhibition with Rachel Uffner Gallery (March 8–April 20, 2014), where she is inaugurating the gallery's new large space with eight large paintings, all 90 x 80 inches. This is the first time since 2009 that Greenbaum has had a solo show of large paintings in New York, and it should establish once and for all that she is one of the most innovative and adventuresome painters of her generation. For while the eight paintings are exactly the same size, each work distinguishes itself from its brethren through a particular palette and its intricate play of forms, cutout shapes, negative spaces, drawing and application of materials.

Bubblegum pink, fire engine red, various shades of violet, turquoise, lemon yellow, black, green and blue — Greenbaum seems never to have met a color she wouldn't try. More often than not, she takes an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink approach to materials, using oil, acrylic, flashe, ink, acrylic marker, colored pencil, and oil crayon, often combining a number of them in a single painting. She is a hands-on painter who figures everything out in the making, but hasn't fetishized either the process or the materials. Central to all the work is her commitment to mark making and drawing.

Greenbaum works incrementally, first putting down a line or a shape, followed by something different, perhaps done with a different material. She may cover the canvas's rectangle with interlocking, rounded shapes, or fill the center of a painting with a large structural form constructed of angular clusters of pink and light blue parallel bands or paint a set of curving lines that evoke an aerial view of a tortuous stretch of highway overpasses and cloverleaves gone haywire.

Greenbaum is apt to cover over a previously made form or to blur it with water, but she doesn't wipe away her marks or completely obliterate what she has already made. There is no looking back, no signs of fussing or finessing, no overt signs of struggle. Each layer she puts down has a particular material density and speed, a distinctive character. Some forms or marks seem intent on jostling their adjacent forms or intruding upon them, like the unwanted head or hand that photobombs a particular moment. Her goal doesn't seem to be resolution, but rather the courting of chaos or what might also be called the moment just before ecstatic dissolution.

If, as Walter Pater claimed, all art aspires to the condition of music, then Greenbaum's music is neither symphonic nor mellifluous, landing somewhere between dissonance (chaos) and harmony (order). In order to achieve this in-between state, she endows every conglomeration of marks with its own space, where it moves at its own rhythm without regard to whatever else is unfolding in the painting's rectangle. The lines of a colored pencil may be quicker, less dense and more sinuous than those of a brushstroke of oil paint, for example, but the one doesn't infringe upon the other. The drips, which start from a painting's top edge, move at still another speed. And behind the drips lurk faded washes of color and an airy mass of curling and meandering lines. Meanwhile, colors collide, support, frame, inflect, or stand apart.

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It's like being at a party where everyone is clamoring to be heard, but no one controls the carousing, and dancers swiftly change partners. Or, if you want a technological analogy, Greenbaum's paintings are animated by different kinds of color-coded circuitry that overlap and snake around cutout shapes and stair-like structures. It is an incredibly difficult balance riddled with disruptions. Paul Cezanne opened painting up and inserted disruptors within the composition, but subsequent generations closed painting down and smoothed it out, reaching what some believe is the end of painting.

Omnivorous in her desire to open painting back up, to acknowledge the plane while unsettling the composition, Greenbaum keeps disrupting her paintings, usually by introducing a different material —



Joanne Greenbaum, "Untitled" (2013), oil, oil crayon, acrylic, and ink on canvas

acrylic marker or oil stick alongside oil paint. In contrast to her contemporaries, she integrates two or more different systems or languages, achieving a composition that is simultaneously a standoff and a structure overrun by lines. It is a masterful accomplishment, which flies in the face of those who practice a form of painting that is unified and resolved.

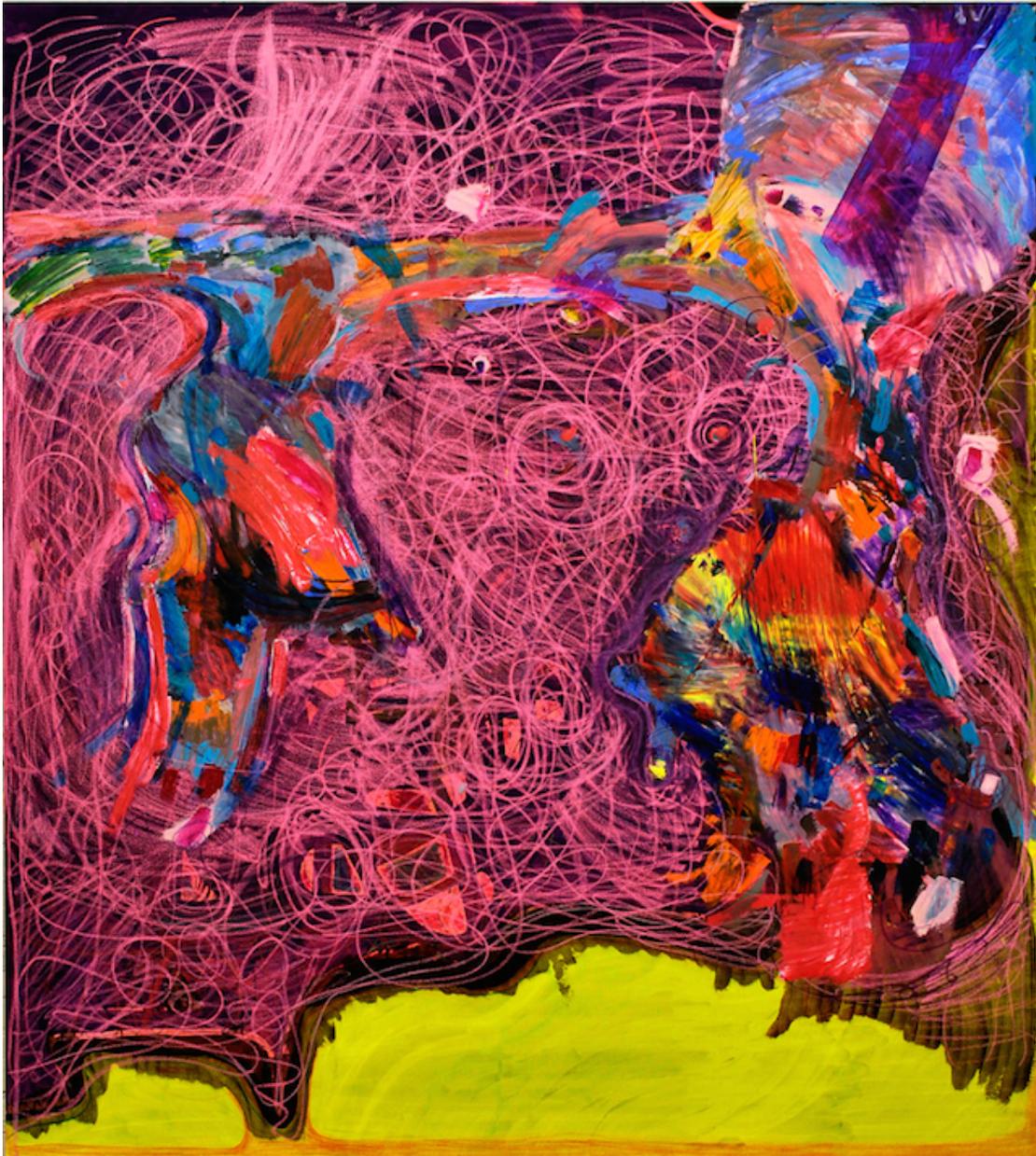
What further distinguishes Greenbaum from her contemporaries is that she achieves her disruptions without resorting to collage or the appropriation of past styles; nothing feels arbitrary. Her paintings aren't all of a piece, but they aren't mash-ups either. That's what I mean by achieving a difficult and seemingly impossible balance. The other distinguishing feature is the different

speeds and kinds of movements she's able to pack into a single work without making it feel claustrophobic or crammed. Our attention darts around, focusing and refocusing, as if trying to follow swarms of birds circling and swooping. While there is little stillness in her work, constant agitation isn't her objective either.

At one point, while standing in the middle of the exhibition, surrounded on all sides by Greenbaum's paintings, I was reminded of Pollock saying, "I am nature." Greenbaum seems to me, could respond by saying, "Yes, but I am the city." Her anarchic, urban paintings brim with an air of pandemonium that is electrifying, daunting and disturbing. They are like invitations to ride a roller coaster without strapping yourself in. Her forms and marks always acknowledge the painting's

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Joanne Greenbaum, "Untitled" (2014), oil, ink, acrylic, and flash marker on canvass edges, but hardly seem contained by them. There is a monster inside Greenbaum's paintings trying to breathe. It is just the kind of monster that painting needs right now — one that shakes things up so nothing will ever be quite the same again.

Joanne Greenbaum continues at Rachel Uffner Gallery (170 Suffolk Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through April 20.

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