

ART & DESIGN

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By ROBERTA SMITH, WILL HEINRICH and MARTHA SCHWENDENER JULY 20, 2017

BECKY BEASLEY

Through Aug. 19. 80WSE Gallery, 80 Washington Square East, Manhattan; 212-998-5747, steinhardt.nyu.edu/8owse.

Fans of the spare Joycean short stories of the American writer Bernard Malamud should see “A Gentle Man,” the impeccable New York debut of the British artist Becky Beasley at 80WSE Gallery at New York University. So should those who don’t know his work. Ms. Beasley calls her installation piece “a film with décor,” using as its title a description of Malamud (1914-1986) by his longtime editor Robert Giroux. Actually the work is four short films that make highly particular use of light, color, music and words (all Malamud’s); impinge on one another in thought-out ways; and incorporate telling details and small objects gleaned from the Malamud archives, including to-do lists and notebooks. The films are accompanied by austere wrought-iron benches, linoleum and men’s padded pullovers in a progression of colors.

The piece illuminates the flow between Malamud’s life and his heavily autobiographical fiction, centering on “Spring Rain,” a short story so spare it almost seems flayed, written when Malamud was just 28, but only published three years after his death. It covers slightly more than one day and fully conveys the hobbled life of George Fisher, an older man played here by the British actor Peter Beasley, the artist’s father, whose emotion-filled, rain-spattered face dominates the last film.

A yellow highway line on the floor charts Broadway's course, and Malamud's early life and education, through Manhattan to City College. It also leads us from the only light source — 80WSE's big front window — into darkness, and night, like the story.

Much is clarified and deepened by reading the available printed matter, an explanatory brochure and "Spring Rain" itself. Some may take issue with the need for ancillary information. Initially I did. But it is a great pleasure to read this material in the gentle atmosphere of Ms. Beasley's beautiful piece, and then walk through it, sitting here or there, occasionally returning to the light to reread.

ROBERTA SMITH

'I PLAN TO STAY A BELIEVER'

Through Aug. 19. Andrew Kreps Gallery, 537 West 22nd Street, Manhattan; 212-741-8849; andrewkreps.com.

This intense, and intensely timely, summer group show starts with a formally self-effacing 1992 newspaper collage by Robert Gober. In it, Mr. Gober juxtaposes a nauseating article about a serial child abuser with one whose headline reads "Bush Is Sent Forth as Champion of Family Values." None of the 15 other artists' pieces are quite as direct, but many of them share the same interest in sex that can't be distinguished from power and power that feels like violence.

In Tala Madani's satirical small oil "A Banana Is Speaking," a phallic white banana, half-peeled, approaches a microphone stand against a lush black background while onlookers watch in states of shock and dismay. In her two small oils, "Boceto del Zulia I" and "Boceto del Zulia II," Beatriz González turns her focus toward dreamy archetype, rendering dislocated Colombians in Venezuela as nearly monochrome silhouettes without feet.

Wu Tsang's "Female Hero," a wooden coffin with a mirrored interior in which neon letters spelling out "You Sad Legend" seem to echo down into eternity, demonstrates how easy it is to construct an intractable problem with a few simple pieces.

Leon Golub's 1972 acrylic painting "The Assassin," of a couple in a violent erotic embrace, is a double St. Sebastian with bullet holes, and a couple of

Catherine Opie's large color photographs of high school football players, in this context, are heartbreaking: Staring gravely into the camera, "Sean" and "Martin" look like eagerly budding victims of their own cultivated aggression.

WILL HEINRICH

MESCHAC GABA

Through July 28. Tanya Bonakdar, 521 West 21st Street, Manhattan; 212-414-4144, tanyabonakdargallery.com.

For millions of people migrating or living in refugee camps, tents serve as temporary homes and places of shelter. In Meschac Gaba's exhibition at Tanya Bonakdar in Chelsea, the large tent occupying the downstairs gallery space is a symbolic structure. It refers to Mr. Gaba's own experience but also draws attention to the plight of the displaced and the way nations and borders can restrict the movements of people.

The tent is made with a bright fabric whose pattern is an imaginary global flag, which Mr. Gaba created by digitally fusing elongated versions of all the world's flags. Inside, you can sit and draw with colored pencils and hang your work alongside the works of other visitors, some of whom are artists represented by the gallery or art world figures.

In the upstairs gallery is an installation of hand-braided wigs mounted on armatures and displayed on pedestals, like ceremonial African headpieces. Continuing a project Mr. Gaba started in the early 2000s, the headpieces mimic architectural structures — for this show, buildings in Washington, D.C. A nearby video captures 15 people walking solemnly, in single-file, through the streets of Cotonou, Benin's largest city, wearing the Washington wigs.

There is a sly humor to the project. Seeing the Pentagon, White House, United States Capitol and Hirshhorn Museum move by in wig form feels absurd, even silly. But this playful homage to Washington might be seen as something more serious: a protest or sacred ritual in which unilateral power is equalized, quietly, via a simple artistic gesture art.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

THE HORIZONTAL

Through Aug. 31. Cheim & Read, 547 West 25th Street, Manhattan; 212-242-7727, cheimread.com.

This summer group show offers an inspiring reminder of how broad the creative field can be even within a narrow formal stricture. As the title promises, every one of the 22 wall-mounted works by mostly famous names is organized around horizontal lines. But otherwise they vary enormously. The works include Serge Poliakoff's 1937 gouache "Bandes Colorées," which runs through nine colored stripes from red to violet and back to yellow again, and Juan Uslé's nine-foot-tall, overpoweringly handsome 2017 painting "Soñe Que Revelabas (Missouri)," which mostly consists of black-and-verdigris-colored vertical strokes.

Matthew Wong's oil "Last Summer in Santa Monica," a browner take on Poliakoff's rainbow, becomes a hazy summer sunset with the addition of a tiny white V for a gliding sea gull, while Hiroshi Sugimoto performs an opposite transformation with his nocturnal photo "Baltic Sea, Rügen," which looks like a somber, two-tone study of the color black.

But what's still more interesting is the way the context of all these other stripes opens up the show's two Agnes Martins, especially her six-foot-square "Untitled #5," which is hung next to a tall, rectangular Louise Fishman painting called "Bitter Herb." Only after noticing the way Ms. Fishman's six dark bands of color seem to roll constantly upward did I appreciate, for the first time, the genius of Martin's square. Its own six creamy-gray bands, divided by narrower lines of darker gray, held my gaze, buoyant and bodiless, in place.

WILL HEINRICH

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