The Whitney Museum. View from Gansevoort Street. Photographed by Ed Lederman, 2015.

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At the Galleries

THE BIG NEWS LAST SEASON WAS THE OPENING OF THE WHITNEY'S new home on Gansevoort Street, near the Hudson River, designed by the Renzo Piano Building Workshop. But there were also other attractions: sculpture exhibitions—abstract and figurative, current and historical—in the U.S. and Europe, as well as an equally wide-ranging, less geographically dispersed group of painting shows. The sculpture exhibits ranged from Vincent Barré's recent works in France, to Robert Taplin's witty narratives in Philadelphia, to Anthony Caro's steel constructions from the 1960s in Los Angeles; the painting exhibits included abstractions by Thomas Nozkowski, Atta Kwami, and Larry Poons, landscapes by Julian Hatton and Graham Nickson, and an engaging, odd-ball installation by Summer Wheat, all in New York.

First: the Whitney. The consensus is that Piano got it right. The entrance to the museum, both from the street and inside the generous lobby—or as Piano calls it, "the piazza"—is welcoming, the relation to the High Line is appealing, and the way the building responds to the once gritty neighborhood without calling too much attention to itself is a welcome change from most of what has been erected nearby. The old buildings of the former Meatpacking District, with their deep canopies, still dominate as we approach, testimony to the neighborhood's recent past, even though the shop fronts are now full of chic clothing instead of sides of beef.

The Whitney has gained some desirable amenities for the first time: a small, handsome theater with views of the Hudson, an education center and classrooms, and a beautifully appointed study center for works on paper. The elegantly proportioned galleries have the same ceiling heights as the Whitney's former home in the Breuer building, but there's much greater flexibility, and, with 50,000 square feet for exhibitions and 13,000 of outdoor galleries and terrace, there will now be something like three times the amount of space dedicated to the museum's important, previously underused permanent collection, as well as larger galleries for temporary exhibitions, and, on the ground floor, a gallery permanently open to the public free of charge. The four upper floors of exhibition space nicely combine elegance, industrial rawness, and the refined, technically sophisticated, functional detailing we expect of Piano. As subdivided for the opening installation, the galleries felt both generous and intimate, while the sculpture terraces,

The Whitney Museum. Sculpture terraces and staircases. Photograph © Nic Lehoux.

linked by their own outdoor stairways, made even familiar works look fresh against the vast panorama of the city. Lighting is good throughout, especially in the skylit eighth floor. A black box for video handles sound isolation well. Circulation is logical and clear—a notable contrast to the Whitney's sister organization on 53rd Street, where visitors routinely enter the permanent collection galleries from the exit, confused by where the escalators decant them. We're always oriented at the Whitney, in part because of occasional views of the Hudson, to the West, and Manhattan, including the Empire State Building, to the East, which offer a nicely paced relief from serious looking.

And there is a lot to look at seriously in the opening exhibition, "America Is Hard to See," a showcase of the museum's own holdings, organized by Donna De Salvo, Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Programs, and a team of Whitney curators. (The title comes from a Robert Frost poem.) Divided into twenty-three thematic sections, each characterized by the title of an included work, the show purports, we are told, to "revisit and revise established tropes while forging new categories." I was informed by a curator friend whom I respect and admire that the exhibition was "not a survey, but an idea"—whatever that might mean—but however obscure the notion, "America Is Hard to See," like the building in which it is installed, does a great many things right. Some stellar, well-known works are nicely presented, along with unfamiliar, rarely (if ever) exhibited examples, and atypical, often early efforts by established artists, with works in different mediums shown together. All the currently required categories—history, politics, identity, popular culture, and all the rest of it—have been addressed, largely in informative and thought-provoking ways.

There's also a lot to praise. We can revel in seeing most of the museum's fine paintings by Stuart Davis, as well as a good selection of its Arshile Gorkys and its splendid sculptures by David Smith. Two powerful Marsden Hartleys greet us, as we get off the elevator on the eighth floor, followed by some less familiar Florine Stettheimers, including a view of the New York skyline that anticipates Saul Steinberg. Elsewhere, among other pleasures, we find an unusual, very good Thomas Downing—a wall-mounted construction deploying layers of color—an outstanding Elizabeth Murray, a fine Dorothea Rockburne, one of Anne Truitt's subtle three-dimensional, minimal paintings, a muscular Philip Guston abstraction, and what may be the best Alma Thomas I've ever seen, one of the inventive African American painter's largest and most economical abstractions, a rhythmically organized "fabric" of blue and red. Works by those superb self-taught artists, Bill Traylor and James Castle, are integrated with the efforts of "schooled" artists, not relegated to a separate category. And much, much more, including, in the ground floor free-of-charge gallery, a delightful tribute to the museum's origins as the Whitney Studio Club, founded on 8th Street by the sculptor and collector, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. She must have been quite something, to judge by a portrait by Robert Henri

that introduces the show—the socialite-artist shown as Bohemian and flirtatious, reclining on a couch, in turquoise lounging pajamas.

But—and I'm truly distressed that there's a but, when so much of "America Is Hard to See" is illuminating, thoughtfully selected, and intelligently, even, at times, wittily installed—there are conspicuous omissions in the opening show. Among the artists not represented are John Marin, Milton Avery, Hans Hofmann, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, Fairfield Porter, Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Larry Poons, Dan Flavin, Martin Puryear, and Thornton Dial. When I queried a curator friend about this, I was told, "We'll show them. But they're such well-established artists," an explanation that made little sense given the inclusion of Jackson Pollock, Donald Judd, Cy Twombly, and a host of other equally celebrated figures. The effect of the omissions is very troubling. "America Is Hard to See" distorts the history of postwar American abstraction by writing Color Field painting, among other things, out of the record, suggesting that this work (and that of the other excluded artists) is irrelevant. To complicate the message further, while a few of the excluded artists appear in the fat *Whitney: Handbook of the Collection* available in the bookstore, most are not there, either, while some of the exhibited artists are not in the handbook. I expect that kind of Maoist revisionism from the Museum of Modern Art, not from the Whitney. I sincerely hope it's not an augury of things to come.

On the other side of the Atlantic, in Brittany, in the former stables of the eighteenth-century chateau of the Domaine de Kerguéhennec, Vincent Barré showed large sculptures made over the past five years and equally large, economical drawings. (While I had nothing to do with organizing the exhibition, an article I wrote previously about Barré is included in the catalogue.) All of the works were resolutely abstract but resonated with our memories of things in the world around us. Barré's thickset, vertical "columns," for example, whether made of massive wood, cast aluminum, or cast iron, at once evoked the human torso and ancient trees. Horizontal works, such as the long, slender forms that appeared to float in an elegant reflecting pool in front of the chateau, or, indoors, a series of tapering, open rings, placed on their sides and loosely nested, suggested everything from reclining figures to aquatic animals to fragments of ancient architecture. In the end, our attention was demanded not by these multivalent associations, but by the intense physicality of Barré's ambiguous forms: the varying shapes of openings and the differing thicknesses of edges; the subtle differences between a pair of rhythmically swelling crown-like sculptures, one in matte grey aluminum, one in dark brown cast iron, curving at our feet; the way two similar, robust aluminum columns, one vertical, one horizontal, changed meaning according to their orientation. Paradoxically, this physicality was emphasized by our being able to see into many of the works, which sharpened our awareness of volume and mass. Barré's sculptures seem lucid, their formal conceptions transparent, yet the

more we study them, the more elusive, allusive, and introspective they appear to be. We begin to question our notions of light and heavy, animate and inanimate. We free-associate, and then we return to the fascinating particulars of the hard-to-pin-down objects before us. At the Domaine de Kerguéhennec, the historical overtones of the elegant setting enhanced the forthright, contemporary materiality of Barré's sculpture, enriching our experience of his work.

Another lesson in the salutary effects of contrast could be had at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art, where Robert Taplin was the latest artist to install a specially commissioned work above the main entrance to the venerable Frank Furness building. Taplin's *The Young Punch Juggling*, part of an ongoing series about this problematic character, balances on one foot against the neo-Gothic elaborations above the door, tossing a panoply of unlikely objects—a rolling pin, a top hat, what may be a woman's undergarment—in an arc above him. The sculpture conflates the time-honored Hindu image of the many-armed Shiva Nataraja, performing the cosmic dance, holding a variety of attributes, and the wholly Western, eighteenth-century tradition of porcelain commedia dell'arte characters. At night, however, colored lights bring Taplin's *The Young Punch Juggling* wholly into the present.

Within the Academy's galleries, a selection of other sculptures from Taplin's Punch series was installed among ambitious history paintings and chilly marble figures by some of America's leading nineteenth-century neoclassical artists. Taplin's "tableaux," mostly intimate, pedestal-mounted pieces, plus two almost monumental versions, cast in sugary white resin, regaled us with the character's bawdy, banal, or businesslike adventures, updated to the modern world—everything from the young Punch watching television and shopping with his smartly-dressed mother, to the mature character as both a pillar of bourgeois correctness and as a homeless person, plus a lot in between. While the small scale and pristine surfaces of Taplin's sculptures, along with their equivocal subjects, pulled us into the realm of the figurine, his simplified forms and the precision with which he chooses his narrative moments made us think about the succinct stories told by the carvers of Romanesque capitals and church façades. (He was, in fact, initially trained as a medievalist.) Yet seeing Punch among the Academy's classicizing nudes and heroes altered the way we read these engaging, provocative works. Taplin seemed to question the entire academic tradition, challenging the high-minded idealism of the surrounding works with a very different, vernacular inheritance: the modern adventures of a rapscallion who has both delighted and frightened children for centuries. I've been following Taplin's sculpture for almost two decades, but I felt I was seeing the Punch series for the first time.

Anthony Caro's painted steel sculptures, in "Caro: Works from the 1960s," at Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles, bore vivid witness to how radical and startling these works remain. Half a century after they were

made, Caro's constructions continue to look fresh and unexpected, with their faultless sense of scale and unpredictable configurations. Whether geometric or fluid, they claim and animate large amounts of the space we occupy by virtue of their refusal to resemble anything preexisting. In the Los Angeles installation, some unfurled at our feet, apparently skimming the ground, while others pulled themselves into the air, their clear hues and athletic poise making us forget the probable weight of their industrial steel components and accept, without question, their defiance of gravity. Upstairs, smaller works made us think about what it means to rest on a table instead of a floor.

More place than object, Caro's remarkable large sculptures of the 1960s keep us moving around them, measuring the subtle relationships of like and unlike elements or the play of projections, overlaps, and recessions against our sense of our own bodies, without being tempted to name what we are seeing. We wordlessly interpret Caro's structures in terms of how it feels to reach, to move through space, and to push away from the ground. Until his sudden death at 89, in 2013, Caro continued to challenge himself, in his work, and to challenge our definition of what sculpture could be, advancing what he called "the onward of art." In the last few years, it has been exciting to see the steel, Perspex, and wood pieces he made in his last decades, when they were shown in Venice and London in 2013 and 2014, but it was no less exciting to be reminded, at the Los Angeles show, of the exuberant structures that announced Caro's brilliance in the first place—the painted constructions that established his reputation, when he was still in his thirties, and help to sustain that reputation today.

Painters refused to be outdone by sculptors last season. At Pace, Chelsea, Thomas Nozkowski showed an astonishing group of his typically intimate paintings, oils on paper, and drawings, all made in 2013 and 2014. As usual, the cumulative effect was of apparently endless invention. While we have no trouble recognizing a Nozkowski because of its delicate surface and sensitive touch, its rhythmic patterns and near-patterns, its ravishing color, and, above all, its apparently unnamable, abstract, but highly charged "image," we are acutely aware that the author of these compelling works never repeats himself. At Pace, Nozkowski himself installed the show, so the groupings subtly introduced themes and variations based on webs, warped grids, dotted fields, looming centralized images, floating and/or dissolving abstract "protagonists," and more. Each of these typologies, for lack of a better word, was approached freshly and differently in each medium, at each scale, and with each iteration, yet distant family resemblances persisted among tenuously related works. And if this contradictory coexistence of extreme singularity and nuanced interconnection weren't enough, we were reminded that the oils on paper were not studies from the canvases, but simply alternative explorations, rethinkings of pictorial notions not exhausted by a single use.

As always, Nozkowski's works both demanded and rewarded close

attention, revealing more and more delicate inflections of touch, line, and color, with scrutiny. Like dream images that escape us the more we try to recall them, his limitless configurations seem to exist in a region just outside of conscious reasoning. They always seem specific, full of significance, and immensely important, yet they are also unidentifiable. And while they appear to be intensely serious, suggesting that there's a lot at stake in whatever is going on, they can also be antic, even comical. The tension between these conflicting readings animates even the most restrained of Nozkowski's work and contrasts with the sheer beauty of his surfaces and his seductive color, adding to the potency of these deceptively fragile, delicate pictures. Nozkowski is, quite simply, one of the very best painters working today. According to the collections listing on the Whitney's website, the museum doesn't own any of his work. Isn't it time to remedy that?

At Howard Scott Gallery, the distinguished Ghanaian painter, printmaker, and art historian Atta Kwami showed recent canvases and works on paper, lively assemblies of blocks and bars (and the occasional wedge) of radiant color. The stacked, jostling blocks, subtly varied in proportion and size, recall traditional African narrow loom weavings—which the artist acknowledges as a source, as well as traditional Ghanaian tribal architecture—but the rhythms of Kwami's energetic images are so syncopated and unpredictable that they move his paintings into new territory, apart from any specific reference. Over time, Kwami's works become increasingly surprising, their spatial organization richer. We become aware of how blocks change sizes and orientation, how squares and rectangles compete for primacy, and how lines and bars tilt and drift. The result is to animate the pictures' geometric underpinnings, creating a kind of Hans Hofmann-esque "push/pull," at a more intimate scale and with more refined surfaces than Hofmann usually explored. But the best of Kwami's efforts do not need to be justified by comparisons. His energetic, sophisticated paintings attract us with their dazzling play of color and keep us engaged, revealing increasing complexity, the more time we spend with them. Kwami has exhibited often in museums and galleries, internationally, and is represented in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C., and the Victoria and Albert, among other institutions in what he calls "the overdeveloped world." Let's hope he continues to show regularly in New York so that we can follow the evolution of this splendid artist.

I'm a fan of Larry Poons's work from all phases of his long life as a painter: pulsing Lozenge canvases, cascading Throw paintings, and most recently, his unstable, swirling webs and skeins of fantastically varied, modulated hues constructed with urgent swipes of the brush, such as those he showed last season at Danese/Corey. It's no casual observation to say that Poons's most recent "hand-painted" abstractions are some of his very best works of this type to date. Unimaginable combinations of stabbed, dragged, swoops and whorls of color created

pulsating expanses that seemed to test the limits of perception. Just how many nuances of colors that we cannot name is the human eye able to see? As Poons has taught us to expect, since the vibrating Lozenge paintings that established his reputation when he was barely out of his twenties, he makes us doubt the evidence of our senses, at the same time that he seduces us, now with gorgeous hues, now with restrained half-tones that appear as sumptuous as full-bore chroma.

As in the past, we were held by the gatherings of color, both full throttle and relatively subdued, when we focused on them, but if we turned away and then looked again, everything seemed to have changed. What was new was the play of overscaled "drawn" configurations against the shifting chromatic expanses. Unidentifiable but compelling "images" seemed to pull themselves to the surface of the canvas, as if coming up for air through the seas of brushy paint, and then, before we could focus clearly on them, subsiding into the enveloping tangles of color. The implications of Jackson Pollock's poured webs have been translated back into hand gestures and transformed into a new, expressive material language. Poons is seventy-seven. He has been making extraordinary, original paintings since the 1960s, including, in the past decade, some of the best works of his life. Isn't it time for a serious museum retrospective?

Two very different but equally engaging approaches to landscape were demonstrated by Julian Hatton's "New Season" at Elizabeth Harris Gallery and Graham Nickson's "Spectrum" at Betty Cuningham Gallery. Hatton's recent canvases functioned at once as bold abstractions constructed with zones of saturated color and as convincing evocations of tree trunks, fields, and shrubs, in both near and distant views, all transubstantiated into broad gestures of a rapid brush. The most recent paintings—2014–2015—were more casually constructed than the slightly earlier works—2012 and 2013—a logical development, given the newer pictures' often larger size and more generous internal scale. The expressionist echoes that have enlivened much of Hatton's work were still present, but with a new sense of freedom and daring. There's never been anything literal about Hatton's evocations of the landscape, but his newest pictures seemed to distill his pleasure in the natural world into an even more personal language of rhythmic strokes and touches, as if the act of transferring oil paint to a surface recapitulated the energy of growth itself. I was particularly interested in *Trouble*, a densely layered, moody canvas from 2015, distinguished by an odd, autumnal palette of cream, greenish blue, and orange, tamed with blue-blacks. *Trouble* seemed to resonate with the character of a particular, albeit unidentifiable place, at the same time that it appeared to be on the verge of falling apart. I kept going back to it.

Graham Nickson's "Spectrum" offered a mini-retrospective of his dazzling landscape watercolors from 2002 to the present, along with some recent canvases, one heroically large, one smaller but no less arresting. The connecting thread was Nickson's undiminished audacity

in tackling subject matter presumably "forbidden" to modern-day painters: sunsets and sunrises, dramatic effects of light and weather, picturesque land formations. He approaches these nineteenth-century Romantic themes fearlessly, employing an entirely contemporary language of intense hues, a robust touch, and unpredictable shapes. The results threaten to devolve into rigorous color-based abstraction before they disarm us with hints of specificity.

For decades, Nickson has risen before dawn to encounter, brush in hand, the ephemeral, elusive qualities of light in places all over the world, in different seasons. Yet there is less sense of meteorological accuracy in the watercolors than of pure painterly exuberance, even when we recognize places with which we were familiar. The sumptuous pools and bands of saturated color become equivalents not for things seen but for how a remarkable individual felt about what he was seeing, even as he disciplined that response by stressing the geometry of what was before him. The enormous 2014 canvas, *Tree of Birds*, a spherical tree full of white birds, against a dramatic mountain and a churning sky, was no less "abstract" but carried with it an overtone of a slightly troubling narrative. *White Sun*, the most recent canvas in the exhibition, a tough-minded 2015 landscape, had the breadth and directness of the watercolors—something unusual for Nickson, who often works on large canvases for years, adjusting not only the image, but also the very size and proportions of the support. It will be interesting to see how this new forthrightness of approach evolves.

At Fridman Gallery, Summer Wheat's "Walk-In Pantry" presented a group of eleven large, brooding paintings installed around a central cluster of brilliantly colored "paint-rugs." The starting point, the artist says, was Johannes Vermeer's well-known *The Milkmaid*, 1657–58, in the Rijksmuseum. Wheat began thinking about all the unseen elements implied by the painting. "What is under the milkmaid's table?" she says she wondered. "What's inside her pocket?" Wheat imagined a room adjoining the light-filled kitchen in which the sturdy young woman pours milk from an earthenware jug—a walk-in pantry filled with food stuffs, utensils, crockery, and more. Each of the large, vertical canvases suggested a cupboard, most subdivided with shelves, filled with sometimes unlikely assortments of supplies: *Spaghetti and pickles*, *Teapot and ice cream*, *Pile of fish*, *Stack of pans*, *Piles of shoes*.

At once playful and very serious, the graphic forms of the pantry's accoutrements were rendered mainly with charcoal, fiercely rubbed into the canvas, with white areas re-excavated and heightened with strategically deployed, vigorously stroked patches of intense oil color. The lush, velvety surfaces and the brisk, economically suggested objects that populated the canvases seemed slightly at war with one another, adding an invigorating tension and a sense of immediacy to the confrontational paintings. The texts, brilliant hues, and loaded paint of the nine panels comprising the center "rugs" introduced new elements, making us reevaluate our definition of "painting." Max Beckmann and

Marsden Hartley are clearly precedents for the density and frontality of Wheat's compositions, the sense of lights being pulled up out of darks, and the canny simplifications of her imagery, but her brash celebration of materiality has long been her own. She's been a young painter to pay attention to for some years, presenting us, at various times, with sensuous, witty nudes and aggressive heads, conjured up with paint so thick that it could seem as if the entire object before us were made solely of pigment, absent any support.

Elsewhere in the gallery, related paintings and translucent "stained glass" panels, (actually made of resin, ink, and vinyl), rang changes on the still life theme, but the brooding, dark "views into cupboards," with their suggestion of revealing the unseen, dominated the space. "Walk-In Pantry," we learned, is only one room of the house that Wheat imagines the milkmaid's inhabiting. The complete set will be shown next year at the Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center, Oklahoma City, this gifted young woman's first museum exhibition. I'm interested enough to use some frequent flyer miles to travel west in 2016.