

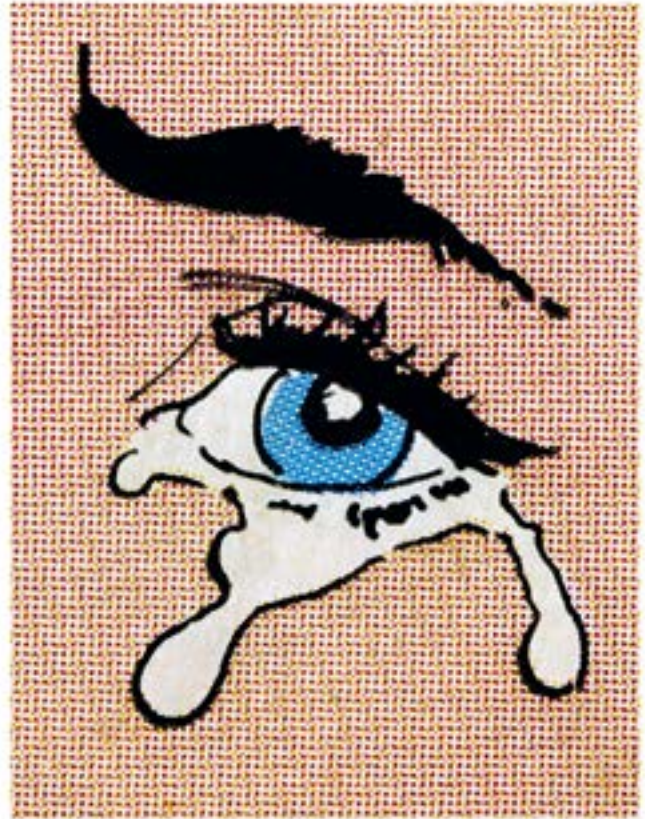
Tales of Manhattan

By Jonathan Goodman

Anton Kern Gallery is nothing if not international. Founded by Kern in SoHo in 1996, the gallery represents more than 30 artists from all over the world. In 2001 the space moved to Chelsea, then again changed venue to its current quarters in Midtown East in 2017. The current show, *Tales of Manhattan*, celebrates the quarter-century history of the gallery as a place for innovative art and an exemplar of the internationalism that has been central to New York's remarkable longevity as a cultural center. The show itself occupies all three public floors of Kern's large building near the Museum of Modern Art, where the gallerist started his career as an intern many years ago. Despite the fact that many artists are represented in the show, *Tales of Manhattan* quite successfully hangs together as a whole. Its aura is worldwide and not necessarily tied to a New York-centric outlook. Yet the feeling is very much like that of New York, being experimental in its contents and urban in its cultivation. The result is a fascinating representation of a point of view not fully American with a particular kind of expressiveness that distances the exhibition, to some extent, from the New York School and its traditions.

No matter how well it coheres, in so large a show there will always be a great diversity of artistic approaches. The emphasis can be raw and populist, as in the painting *Floating* (2021) by Brian Calvin, whose image of two women's heads—one blonde with a florid complexion, green eyeshadow, and red lipstick, and the other with black hair, blue eyeshadow, and red lipstick—is rough to the point of caricature. The noses of both women are rendered at the same time, as if from the side and frontally, in a cubistic manner, the skin color of both different from that of the rest of the face. In a large C-print close-up, Anne Collier presents *Woman Crying #32* (2020). Here a black eyebrow and eyelashes frame a blue eye, beneath which a large, splotchy tear appears in white. The isolated image is staged against a background of small, regularly placed red marks—Collier's version of Roy Lichtenstein's Ben-Day dots. And, rather uncharacteristically, the Japanese erotic photographer Arāki presents two lush, lyrical pictures of flowers. One is mostly red, seemingly bloody, while the other is dominated by green with a malevolent face, a kind of child's toy, peeking out at us from the middle of the image. These works are striking for their unrepentant roughness. They have a visual directness that emphasizes their emotional content.

Paweł Althamer's *Bruno A.* (2020) is an iron-gray ceramic of Lehmbruckesque gravity. The portrait, from the subject's head to his upper thighs, shows an unclothed man looking



Anne Collier, *Woman Crying (Comic) #32*, 2020. C-print, 61 7/8 x 49 3/4 inches. © Anne Collier. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

downward, with chains of small nodular forms that travel across his back and other parts of his body. A hollow in his chest, where his heart would be, shows a three-inch nude woman, her limbs akimbo. The note of eroticism updates an otherwise traditional image. Nicole Eisenman has two sculptures: *Witch Head* (2018), a hollow plaster head incorporating, in garish fashion, mixed media and the effect of smoke; and the more conventionally refined but roughly titled *Weed Holder* (2019). Eisenman's lurid imagery is more than an act of resistance to the tradition of beauty, which according to their point of view seems to have been exhausted. Finally, the back room of the gallery's first floor is dominated by Richard Hughes's *Pedestrian (Hot Ste P)* (2013)—a large, long, and narrow pair of legs and feet, one bent knee extending strikingly high into the air. The piece ends with the upper thighs, incorporating openly articulated knees and

long narrow feet. While the piece can only be described as a figurative work of art, the elongation of Hughes's forms pushes it toward the abstract. Although most of the artworks in this large show are paintings, the sculptures on view make a decisive impact.

Even though paintings are predominant, they are different enough in theme and style to make variety a major element even within the particular constraints of the medium. Ellen Berkenblit's *Nature State* (2021) is a large, darkly-toned abstract painting, filled with rounded forms—the kind one might find in nature—that are dark green, mauve, and blue, embellished by line. It is a complex, beautiful work, whose parts move from separation to coherence. Berkenblit looks at these forms with an objective eye, giving the painting an aura of genuine originality. Chris Martin's *Frog* (2021) confronts us with a large, light green rendering of the eponymous creature. Its large eyes and padded digits capture the physical eccentricity of the animal, which is present to us in all its ungainly awkwardness. Isolated as the image is, taken out of context, its strangeness of form and being are heightened. Alessandro Pessoli's painting *Mirror Me* (2017) poses the naked back of a man on a bright green background with an unidentifiable pink object in the upper right quadrant. At the top of the subject's shoulders, where the head should be, is the photographic image of a man with a moustache and small chin beard—is it the artist himself? Pessoli, an Italian working in Los Angeles, offers us a picture in which alienation and eccentricity merge. The realism of the face increases the painterly expressiveness of the body.

Several blue ballpoint drawings created by Andy Warhol in 1956, all but one of scenes in Indonesia, show what an accomplished draftsman he was before he launched the Pop Art movement. They are memorable examples of the artist's early gift for line. These drawings act as an illustration of the way Kern developed his gallery; they show a penchant for the accessible, but also the creatively original, in his choice of artists. If it is hard to characterize the overall experience of a large group show like this, we must be aware of the wide variety of the work we see—indeed, it is clear from this very enjoyable exhibition that art's pluralist multiplicity is alive and well. Each individual work is so original, and executed with such skill, that they are easily enjoyed both on their own terms and as part of a sequence that emphasizes difference and change. The juxtapositions available to the viewer are original and many, offering something to think about as well as enjoy.

Contributor

Jonathan Goodman

Jonathan Goodman is an art writer and poet who focuses on modern and contemporary sculpture. He currently teaches at Pratt Institute. Chance methodologies like the one described in this review interest him greatly.



Pawel Althamer, Bruno A., 2020. Glazed ceramic, 35 3/8 x 19 1/4 x 12 1/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York.



Ellen Berkenblit, *Nature State*, 2021. Oil on linen, 93 x 76 inches. © Ellen Berkenblit. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York.