

Thursday, May 3rd, 2018

Being in the World: Laura Newman at Victoria Munroe

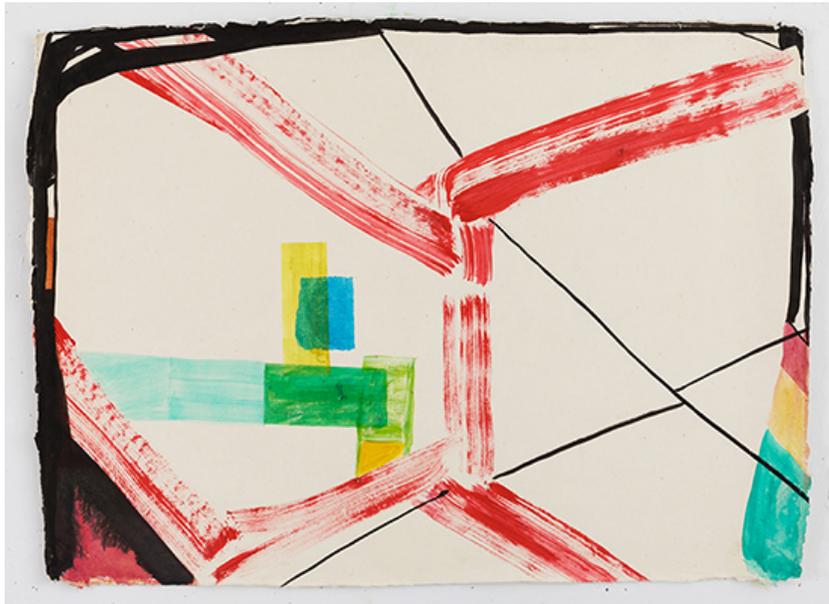
by Jennifer Riley

Laura Newman: New Paintings at Victoria Munroe Fine Art

April 4 to May 12, 2018

67 East 80th Street, between Madison and Park avenues

New York City, victoriamunroefineart.com.



Laura Newman, Rome Studio, 2017. Acrylic, ink and Flashe on handmade wasli paper, 22 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Munroe Fine Art

Laura Newman makes abstract paintings whose points of departure are instances in her life. She draws upon the world around her, from memories and places or from speculative reality. While her work has always been characterized by a remarkable range of mediums and techniques, her latest show, at Victoria Munroe Fine Art, presents a shift from the recent planar distillations of built and natural environments to an all-over sense of dispersion. A number of new elements and approaches generate paintings and works on paper that reinvigorate and update discourse concerning the tension between brushstroke and overall image. A similar dichotomy emerges between distance or remove (of the hand, for instance) and the literalness of surface. An allusion to deep space collides with taut flat areas of color hemmed in and held in place by a variety of lines and textured planes.

Those familiar with the artist's 25-year plus career will recall the way that structure was presented in earlier works as hard edged geometric forms, crisp lines, transparent planes and flattening of form. In more recent work, nameable things such as billboards, houses, doors, and, in and swooping landscapes, fields were identifiable. What now establishes guidelines for the viewer are colossal strokes, elongated collage-like shards of color and thin exploratory lines. Compositional ambiguity, a thickening of atmosphere and a sense of disruption add to an already robust list of qualities and information that establish spatial inversions, engendering a sense of negation and contradiction. Just as collage cracked open Matisse's practice, so too it is having a similar effect for Newman, only in her hands, collage elements are in fact sly *trompes l'oeil* of collage, shapes such as those aforementioned shards, that expand the facture of the work and reflect an understated ease and mastery of materials.

Newman conjures varied moods in this show that lead us on non-verbal paths of visual exploration. One painting suggests night walks in a city under construction; others suggest dreamscapes of layered experience; others still are closer to being pure abstraction. Despite being as varied and inventive as they are eccentric and awkward, all her images feel tangible. We can locate ourselves in them.

In *Ghost Ship* (2015), Newman uses rough, near brutal, black strokes over prepared white ground in a way that puts us in mind of a master of Japanese brush painting. Flat brown shards cluster into an A-frame against an impossibly bright, deep blue sky. Areas of intentionally unpainted raw linen become planes of light and air captured between what could be described as masts. There is an upward thrust to the composition lending these 'masts' a menacing quality. The feeling of the blue is at once optimistic and



Laura Newman, Ghost Ship, 2015. Acrylic, ink and Flashe on linen, 60 x 43 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Munroe Fine Art



Laura Newman, Slice, 2017. Flashe, ink and acrylic on linen, 30 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Munroe Fine Art

have scant bearing upon what it actually delivers: think of those politically heavy handed curatorial statements in the New Museum's Triennial with their attempt to force meaning. In Laura Newman and Catherine Murphy's work, the experience of how someone is thinking and being in the world is manifest.



Laura Newman, Reach, 2018. Acrylic, ink and Flashe on canvas, 54 x 70 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Munroe Fine Art

threatening. The roughness of the dark strokes is softened only by elegantly painted jewel-like shards of color, as in much of the work, larger brush strokes, convincingly conveyed as dry brush marks or rendered as flat planes, are deployed to organize increasingly smaller elements in a pulsating space.

Open framework, shards recalling construction tags and flags and the titles themselves suggest that the built environment continues to concern the artist. *Rome Studio* (2017) places the artist in the "la citta eternale," itself a wonder of all things built, designed, rebuilt and reinvented. *Camera* (2017), whose title could either allude to a room or the tool with a mechanical inner eye, and *Slice* (2017), each contain elements that evince a focus on the layering and widening of time and space, of humanity's trace on nature and the environments we occupy.

Located in Williamsburg (Brooklyn), the artist has witnessed at close hand and warped speed the shift of scale (economic and physical wrought by social gentrification. Glass curtain-walled skyscrapers sprout in every direction and scaffolding abounds. Steel framing of the next building under construction and girders, planes and machinery dotting the landscape inform structures in her works, while bright safety colors of orange, yellow, green and neon pink seem to have crept into her palette. *Reach* (2018), at five foot wide one of the largest canvases in the show, has thinned black paint forming a window-like structure opened to an abstracted watery vista. Thin strips and strokes of color pass through the structure in a twisting dynamic as if caught in a powerful gust of wind. Black strokes made with a dry-brush originate at the top of the canvas where they suggest a window frame that turns into thin lines resembling feet as the eye follows the strokes to the bottom of the image. Thus, as is often the case in Newman's work, planes, marks and strokes perform double duty, typifying her disregard for the separation between abstraction and representation by weaving identifiable forms into an abstract image.

The idea that an abstract painting can be proportionally real is not new per se and yet how it is achieved here feels vital and urgent. Newman upends our often-precarious grasp on what we might think we are seeing, as much in terms of medium as image, by blurring boundaries, for example, between collage, drawing and painting. Her work inverts expectations of depth and flatness co-mingling foreground with background.

I have come to think of Laura Newman as the abstract companion to the realist Catherine Murphy, whose terrific exhibition at Peter Freedman this winter served as an encyclopedic statement of contemporary life. In Murphy, images are wholly realistic while the attitude and ideas they arouse are highly abstract. We peer closely at details of a frontal portrait of a stack of books while being nudged to feel or to think about a myriad of concerns, whether the legacy of minimalism or the fate of pharaonic libraries carved in temple columns, or the advent of eBooks. The multiplicity of technique and perspective in Newman's work has comparably far ranging philosophical and metaphorical implications: her concerns for local populations and the changing environment, for example, are channeled through formal innovations and inquiries—

long a hallmark of New York painting culture. A great deal of contemporary painting seems freighted by concepts that