

# BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

## *Downtown Painting*

Curated by Alex Katz

July - August 2019

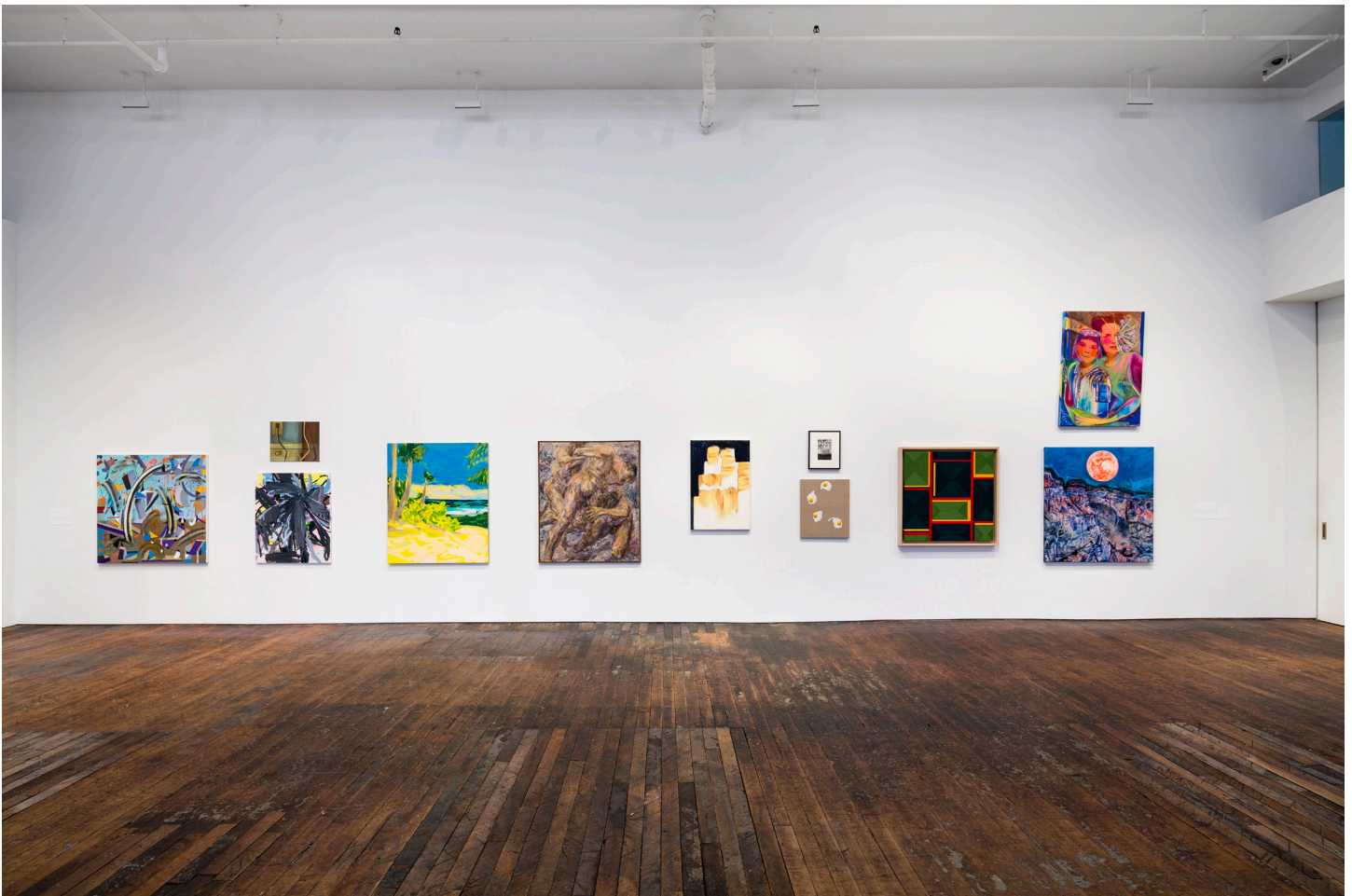
by Jonathan Goodman

ON VIEW

**Peter Freeman, Inc.**

June 5 – July 26, 2019

New York

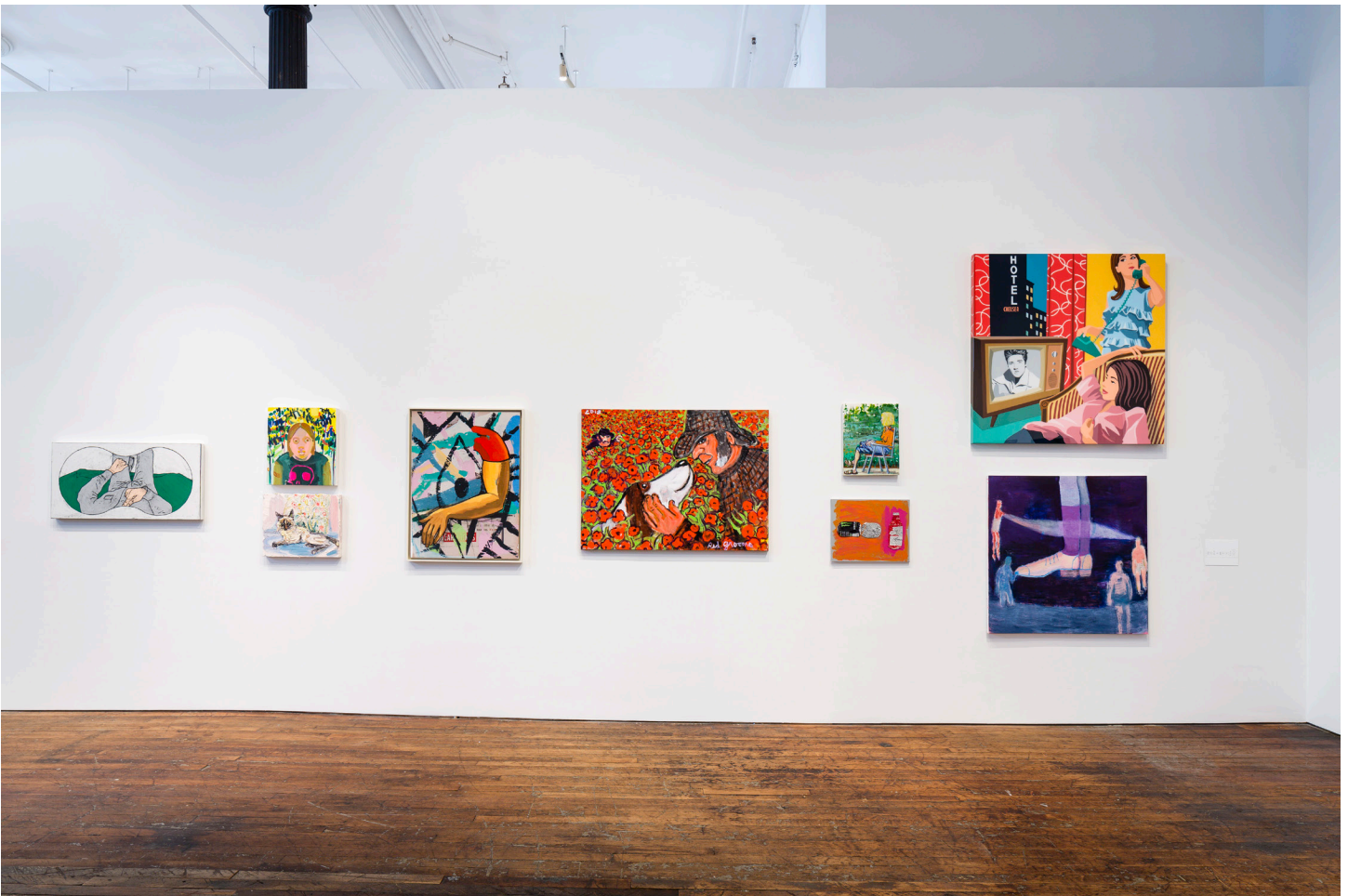


Installation view: *Downtown Painting*, Peter Freeman Gallery, New York, 2019. Photo: Nicholas Knight. Courtesy Peter Freeman, Inc.

As I write, the nonagenarian artist Alex Katz, long a mainstay of downtown painting, is involved in two major shows: the one he has curated at Peter Freeman's gallery and the other is an extraordinary show of recent work at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in Harlem. The first exhibition establishes him, very quickly, as a curator of repute, while the second makes it clear that Katz is moving into a territory wholly his own, particularly in the wonderful scenic studies that pass on, completely successfully, his love of nature. In the *Downtown Painting*, there are nearly eighty paintings to look at, including from such well-known artists as Franz Kline, Al Held, Rackstraw Downes, Carmen Herrera, and Sylvia Plimack Mangold. Other names, as prominent in recognition, seen here are Martha Diamond, Yvonne Jacquette, Chantal Joffe, Justen Ladda, and Robert Moskowitz. It is impossible to do justice to all the individual efforts of these painters, but

we can look at examples indicative of Katz's forceful point: "Whereas uptown art is uncontroversial, unproblematic, and more easily commodified, downtown art is intuitive, self-indulgent, and not made to fit comfortably into a home or institution."

Certainly, the art in this show regularly takes risks, in ways that assert the painter's right to make work that cannot be easily introduced into a comfortable environment outside the studio. But it is also true that the show—in part because it is as good as it is—begs the question whether such principled and formally accomplished work can escape the inevitable commodification of its economic life once the painting has been finished. Maybe the point is moot—it is not within the painter's power to control who buys the work or its meteoric rise in value in an art world in which pricing seems primarily to signal social status. When Franz Kline painted *Sketch for Painting (4 Square)* in 1953, the work, a rectangle with extended columns in black, was innovative to the point of being culturally dangerous. Now, of course, it is an invaluable artifact. The same might be said for Al Held's wonderful *Out and In* (1965), a painting of stripes creating a partial frame around a white square, in the middle of which is another square, mostly red with a green band at the bottom. It is a remarkable work whose rough surface quotes the thick layers of paint favored a generation before. Martha Diamond's *New Space* (n.d.), a lovely abstractions consisting of slightly rough yellow rectangles containing slightly darker yellow stripes, on a background of white framed in black on the left and the top, shows how this kind of painting remains very much alive.



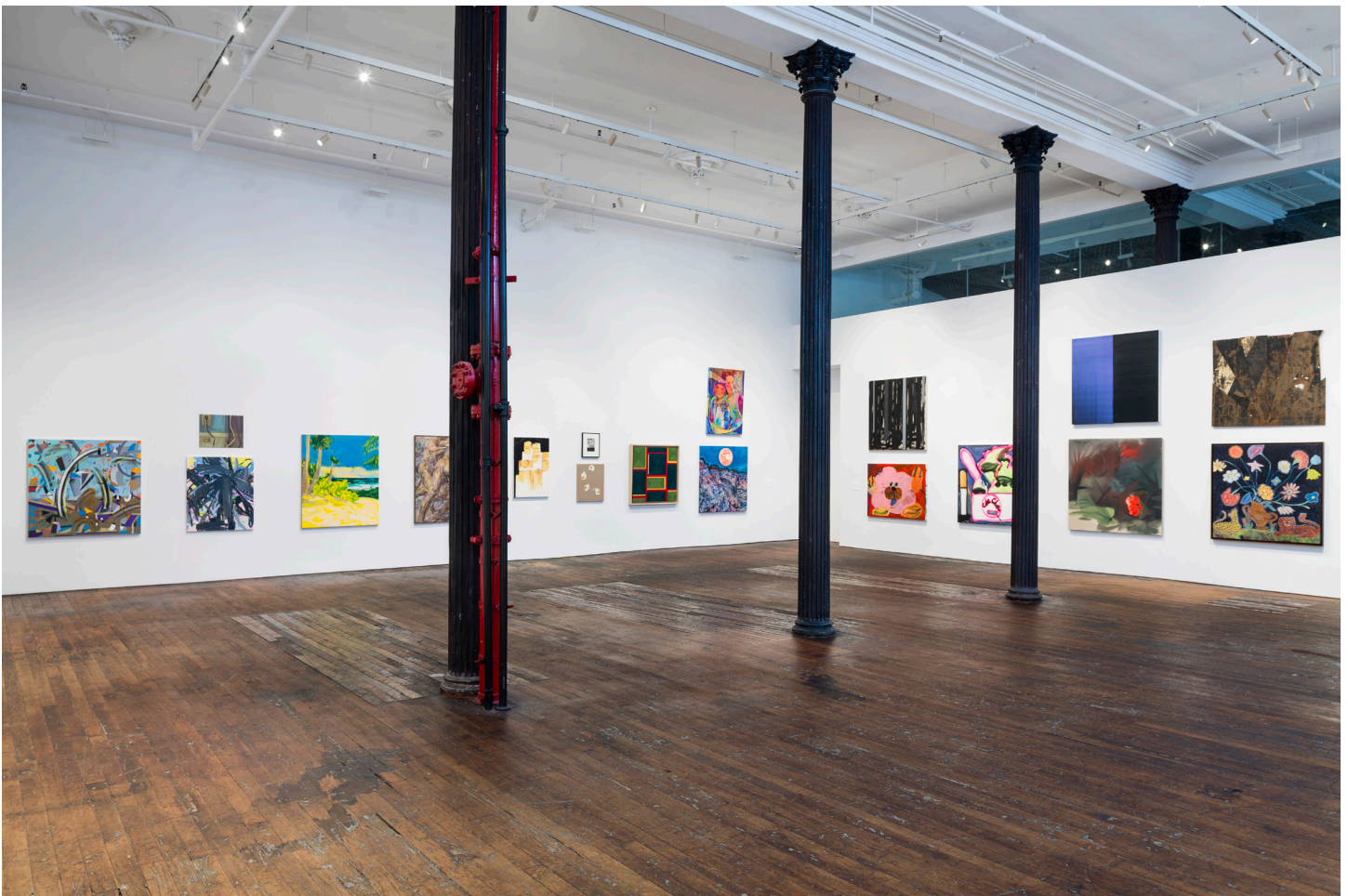
Installation view: *Downtown Painting*, Peter Freeman Gallery, New York, 2019. Photo: Nicholas Knight. Courtesy Peter Freeman, Inc.

Although *Downtown Painting* is primarily, by definition in terms, an urban show, there were some excellent studies of nature. Downes's work, *The Dakota from Just East of the Reservoir* (1966), set in the cold season, consists of two massive, leafless trees rising up just in front of the fence



protecting the reservoir; the double towers of the Dakota loom in the distance. Zach Bruder's *Jardin* (2019) encompasses a wide array of colorful flowers, connected to each other by thin white stems. The background is black, while two feline creatures—likely a spotted leopard and a reddish lion—lie lazily beneath the blooms. Mangold's oil, *The Locust Trees 2/87* (1987), consists of two trees without leaves reaching upward into the center and upper register of the painting, the dark-brown branches offset by a pale white and blue sky. Nicole Wittenberg's *Windermere* (2019) is a sylvan scene—Windermere is the name of the largest lake in England—complete with a yellow-tan patch in the front, some dark green trees and bright, light green shrubbery on the left, and water in the distance. New York is hardly a place where such visions of nature occur, but the painting styles of the artists are independent and free—something to be expected from a show like this.

The abstract work, always a strength in New York, was notable for its excellence. Ernst Caramelle's *View of Untitled* (2014) is a strong non objective painting, mostly of linear bands, often white but including other colors—red, black, gray. Carmen Herrera, now older than a century, contributed an untitled work dating to 1966—two orange, L-shaped forms fitting into each other like pieces of a puzzle. Callum Innes is offering *Untitled Lamp Black No. 4* (2018), a minimal painting of two vertical halves—deep, dark blue on the left and black on the right. Udomsak Krisanamis's *Little Honda* (2011) is a painting densely composed of vertical bands through which bits of a white background peek through; the painting's strong graphic quality depends equally on its structure. *Untitled 1979* (1978) is a non objective work consisting of an open linear drawing made up mostly of triangles painted on top of a four-part background: polygons that are black, pink, and blue-gray in color.



Installation view: *Downtown Painting*, Peter Freeman Gallery, New York, 2019. Photo: Nicholas Knight. Courtesy Peter Freeman, Inc.

The above works and the others in the show demonstrate the high quality of Katz's eye, although the results are so eclectic as to defy easy categories. But then that is the point of downtown painting. Chantal Joffe's affecting *Self-Portrait in Red* (2017) portrays the artist in a red top and black skirt; the painting's roughness amounts to a calling out of integrity—the kind we might expect from artists who eschew a comfortable life for a life committed to art. It is more than sad that downtown New York has been invaded by the wealthy, who like the atmosphere but force committed painters out of the neighborhood. Artists are now moving to the South Bronx and Yonkers in the hope of finding cheap rent. Independence of spirit is still possible, as *Downtown Painting* so eloquently shows—even if the idea of downtown has become more important than its geography. Katz makes that clear in his brief notes to the show, and he is entirely right. More and more, art needs a place where it can survive and not be immediately discovered, so independent visual thinking can take place. This show keeps that thought alive.

## **Contributor**

### **JONATHAN GOODMAN**

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