

BROOKLYN RAIL

Joseph Holtzman: *Six Recent Paintings*



Joseph Holtzman, *Athena by the Sea, a Nocturne*, 2020. Oil on marble in artist's frame, 29 1/2 x 23 1/4 inches, framed: 45 3/4 x 29 3/4 x 3 3/4 inches. All images are Courtesy of the artist and Parker Gallery. Photos by Daniel Terna.

Joseph Holtzman's exhibition of recent oil paintings on marble—which are embedded within a pattern-bedecked *Gesamtkunstwerk* of interior design unlike anything I've ever seen—revel in unconventional taste and are so genuinely weird that it's hard to find many contemporary comparisons. This delightful pop-up exhibition is staged off 73rd and Madison in the former offices of alternative interior design magazine *Nest* (1997–2004), which Holtzman founded. The show was organized by LA's Parker Gallery, which has mounted major exhibitions of historical and contemporary voices running counter to the artistic mainstream, from beloved Bay Area figures like Roy De Forest or Franklin Williams to Gladys Nilsson of Chicago's Hairy Who.

Holtzman finds an excellent collaborator in Sam Parker, whose refreshingly visionary approach shares the painter's energy and tongue-in-cheek humor, qualities that are often lacking in the woefully conventional and overly-serious New York art scene. Holtzman's first solo exhibition on the East Coast, much like his installation at the Hammer Museum in 2014, features an all-encompassing environment of color and pattern, visually situated somewhere between Biedermeier, Arts and Crafts, De Stijl, and 1980s Pattern

and Decoration. This campy atmosphere of celebratory excess serves as the perfect backdrop for his recent oil on marble paintings.

As Susan Sontag has written, “style is everything,” and Holtzman appears to be a veritable encyclopedia of style. Everything in his installation, from the time-cracked antique linoleum flooring to various wallpapers featuring oddities that range from cannabis leaves to wheat shocks, comes from his large personal collection of interior design. In the main room, the felted planes of flat color and interlocking gridded geometries along the walls and ceiling are evocative of Theo van Doesburg's 1926 designs for the Café Aubette in Strasbourg. This stands in charming contrast to the intricate textures and patterns of paintings, linoleum, wall-paper, and lacquered chinoiserie in the foyer. While the felt is matte and absorptive, its red ceiling panels are shot through by a grid of metallic silver paint, a formal counterpoint echoed in the few carefully placed mirrors Holtzman has included in the exhibition. In terms of design, often less is more.

Gilles Heno-Coe, “Joseph Holtzman: Six Recent Paintings.” *The Brooklyn Rail* (December 14, 2020), accessed online.

Rarely, more is more. The latter seems to be the case for Holtzman, whose highly-constructed, idiosyncratic vision comes off as achingly sincere and home-grown, perhaps because he's largely self-taught.

Meanwhile, the paintings that inhabit Holtzman's baroque design environment productively skirt the line between figuration and abstraction, flatness and three dimensions, studied stylishness and naïve self-expression. While it's hard to imagine them hanging in a contemporary collector's minimally furnished penthouse, the works seem like microcosms of the larger context in which they are shown, distilling the same freewheeling, somewhat neurotic, energy of the entire ensemble. These heavily textured oil paintings are executed on surfaces of polished white marble, which Holtzman prizes for its ability to both absorb and reflect light. Among contemporary artists, Holtzman is not alone using marble as a painting surface—Brice Marden comes to mind, but in the latter's case, less may really amount to less instead of more.

In spite of the richly textured impasto surfaces Holtzman favors, his paintings emanate a kind of interior luminosity, notably from occasional vignettes of raw marble which open up like eyes of the storm among swirling tertiary hues of blue, green, purple, and crimson. These presumably heavy panels are securely mounted within hefty artist-designed frames suggestive of weather-worn Stickley furniture. They are individually lit by 19th century brass dental lamps, whose attenuated linear profiles and snaking electrical cords perfectly complement the awkward energy of Holtzman's painted lines.

Paintings like *Athena by the Sea, a Nocturne* (2020) or *Humpty Dumpty Nocturne, July 4, 2017* (2020) are reminiscent of Richard Pousette-Dart's emblematic mid-century canvases and evoke a musicality implied in their titles, with rhythmic, pulsating touches of color that threaten to burst from the formal constraints of their scored compositions. The vaguely Picasso-like profile in *Athena by the Sea, a Nocturne* floats above a fuzzy green patch and churning bands of orange, cerulean, and ultramarine, stoically surveying her lively, vibrant dominion. Unique among the paintings in this show, its light fixture trades the usual brass lampshade for frilly alabaster glass, echoing the opaque luminosity of Athena's abstract, marbly visage.

In almost every painting, highlights are achieved through both additive and subtractive methods, with Holtzman scraping away paint to reveal the marble ground and adding painted dashes and dots along the surface. *Wine-Face Sea* (2019) and *Artist Hibernating* (2019) both partake of a Chagall-like sensibility and cryptic symbolism, with formal echoes of the latter's dense and animate compositions. *Untitled* (2019) is evocative of Monet's late abstractions with its indistinct horizon and vigorous marks, which ultimately break free of Holtzman's rectilinear marble support to extend across the handmade wooden frame itself, echoing the dialectics of interiority/exteriority at play throughout this entire exhibition.

Holtzman's Parker pop-up is refreshingly genre-bending and stylistically hybrid, and its run coincides with the release of *The Best of Nest*, a lavish Phaidon volume edited by Holtzman's longtime friend and collaborator, the designer Todd Oldham. Joseph Holtzman, in person and in print, is nothing less than a delirious feast for the senses.

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