

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

**THE BROOKLYN RAIL**

## JOANNE GREENBAUM *Hallowed Laughter in a Hall of Mirrors*

By Joan Waltemath



Joanne Greenbaum, "Untitled," 2014. Oil, ink, and crayon on canvas, 90 × 80". Photo credit: courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

Joanne Greenbaum's new paintings are full of stuff; very few areas are left open or unattended. In many of these new pieces, colored pencil, marker, or crayon lines run over the surface, giving the feeling of a child let loose. On first impression this creates a powerful energetic field.

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Once your mind has had a chance to sort out the various levels, dissonances, and cadences that form their inner structure, however, that first impression begins to recede and the order in what first appeared as a chaotic field starts to get its say.

In the first painting, “Untitled”(2014), visible from the entrance down the long hall of Uffner’s new space, there is a deep black ground on top of which Greenbaum has painted thin pink and blue parallel stripes to build a series of stairs, triangles, and hourglass forms. After a moment, the densely scribbled on black ground starts to eye you as if to say “and so, what?” Dabs of color take on an anima, as if the frenetic energy of the whole has coalesced into points of life with a will all their own. The painting deepens as an effect of your engagement with it, and the scribbles take on a series of forms that order and layer their complex interaction. The surface becomes a place to inhabit, a place to set down the baggage and reconvene, lighter though not light.

If this first piece takes on the condition of a main event, with all its attendant outliers, “Untitled”(2014), on the side wall, visible only after entering into the main gallery space, seems to reveal something about the densely woven and interconnected nature of the passage of time. We are witness to a sectional view. The way Greenbaum handles her materials has a punkiness

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that allows me to imagine the surface as what becomes visible when a razor blade slices. Many different kinds of markings and colors are in motion, weaving in and around one another; an orange-red painted line moves from the lower right to the upper left describing the profile of a staircase, yet exuding the feeling of a calm constant—the voice of Mother or a life-long friend. Here, an expanse of brilliant turquoise exhilarates a breath of cool on a warm day that somehow remained intact by lingering in the shade. The depth of impression and reference in Greenbaum’s works is a powerhouse that slowly opens up as time renders depth on her plane. The compact network that serves as a central form here is masterful in showing the mind’s eye its own inner landscape.

Some pieces feel faster and more fun, as if every work were not charged with the task of rendering the complexity we navigate on a daily basis: there are other moments when a free form of spontaneity rolls out the laughter. In “Untitled” (2014), hanging next to her turquoise *tour de force*, the scribbles are more uniform and quickly echo each other, while the pink and blue color scheme supports the reading that we are celebrating a birthday party.

Letting my mind run free like the markings in Greenbaum’s paintings, I reflected upon the distinction between the spontaneous, as noted above, and the unexpected. Unexpected is how the blue and red water-thin paint grows on its own over the surface in “Untitled” (2014); the two colors here interact and even blend while remaining autonomous. The enigma they create didn’t deflate once I approached some terms of understanding. Greenbaum has embedded these particular forms in all manner of very differently constructed and painted shapes and drawn lines, which give a solid ground for whimsy, and focus the painting’s structure around the mystery. A blue and orange staircase or frame within a frame reappears nearby, intersected and overlaid

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with aggressive—and what appear in this context to be—out of control elements. Turquoise blue markings trump the frame, reordering the power structure of the field; it's not as pretty looking as it feels real, as if grounded in something that happened and has remained in the memory as an awareness of one of life's actual conditions. Her masterful attention to all these specific details holds this piece in tension and lets it sing. Greenbaum's paintings speak to many things: the nitty gritty, the dark, as well as the light and resonant poetic moments we can experience with them.

Allowing a painting to envelop you is a matter of trust; the 15 minutes you spend with it can have the power to change the tenor of your day, taking up permanent residence in your memory bank—so better to be careful. There is a deep undercurrent of strength in these works, a sense of the artist as a master of sustaining prolonged periods of uncertainty. Artists are usually aware of how growth happens in such periods, and in her current show, Greenbaum shows up its exponential factor.