

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

"The Manhattan Art Review"

Kritic's Korner

Key

***** Great

**** Good

*** Okay

** Bad

* Awful

6/10/2023

Rafael Delacruz - Healing Finger Clean Drawings - [Mitchell-Innes & Nash](#) - *****

I hesitated to give a good friend of mine the big five, but, on the other hand, he's the best painter I know and this is easily the best painting show I've ever seen by an artist of my generation. I've seen a few comparably impressive shows of historical collections, but great historical art is a reaction to a past moment that we can appreciate with hindsight. It's easy to say "Ooh! Picasso was so good in 1912!" or Lassnig or Lozano in the '60s, De Kooning, whatever. Those are past high water marks and it takes little effort to agree with established popular opinion because it's really easy to see something as great when everyone tells you it's great. I tend to trust the canon so I'm not against people following peer pressure to like great artists but, all the same, that kind of appreciation is a sort of low-stakes activity no matter how much you truly enjoy the work. You weren't there to see the art break new ground, so its importance will always be a kind of abstraction to you. Even late-career artists still making great work usually have a feeling of insulation from the world because they've established their styles and keep churning it out with the reassurance that their time has come and gone, even if they're still doing so productively and not resting on their laurels. I love Louise Lawler's recent work, but it succeeds because of Lawler's history, the conceptual lineage she came out of in the '70s, and so on. If a young artist was doing the same thing, even if they did it as well as she did, there'd be a staid inauthenticity of a young artist "doing '70s conceptual roleplaying in the 2020s." Having said that, the only comparable art experience to this show that I can think of is Jasper Johns' "Recent Paintings & Works on Paper" at Matthew Marks from 2019 which, to my mind, is probably the best art show I've ever seen. The best shows of all, the ones that are high-stakes, have a rare feeling of an acute "newness," a vital sense of the present. I've seen a handful, but outside of Johns and this, none have been painting shows. There's contemporary styles of painting, of course, but they all feel delimited, referential, trapped by style rather than freed through it. Painting is hard because it's so burdened by history that, in the absence of a new form and movement, it's almost always prevented from being itself before it begins. As I've made obvious many times, I don't think technology is any sort of a way forward. Rafael actually models his paintings on a computer before making them, or he did, I'm not sure if he still does. But it's immaterial either way, that's just a way of sketching. There's nothing in looking at them to suggest that computers were involved, thankfully. Anyway, after all this preamble I was about to go into describing the work, but I just checked back on my review of his duo show with Ken Price and I pretty much already said everything I was going to say. The important part is that he's pushed and pulled his way through so many methods and influences that he's negated the burden of painting and arrived at himself and, more importantly, painting in itself. I was pretty floored then, but if those were already a huge leap forward from his past work, this is an equally huge leap in scale, complexity, sophistication, color, and range. Like Johns, again, there's a sort of pure fullness of paint as material that takes over between the alternations of abstraction and figuration, becoming both and neither at the same time instead of tamely keeping one foot in each camp, but also completely captivating whether in the obscured abstract masses of *Emperor tomato ketchup*, the weird, almost straightforward narrative of a guy protecting his car from the sun in *Bohemian savage*, or *Don't sleep while we explain*, a coloristic masterpiece somewhere in the middle. Which isn't to mention the free technical acuity between lithographs, cochineal, oil, acrylic, and the video in the back room. There's an impressive disorientation to the work, a sort of formlessness that comes from a total, confident faith in process an instinct instead of the vagueness of uncertainty, which more often than not results in an overreliance on form. By not using compositional armatures, the paintings become all the more perfectly composed for their resistance to easy ways out and a sensitivity to each painting as a discrete thing. A friend said to me at the opening that he's blown painting wide open, and I think that's true. I also think that's the highest compliment that can be paid to a painter.