

### Joanne Greenbaum: *Scaffold*

By Saul Ostrow | May 29, 2024



Installation view: *Joanne Greenbaum: Scaffold*, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, 2024. Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

Though the pictorial mash-up that constitutes Joanne Greenbaum's works appears to be spontaneous—as if the paintings were the result of an unpredictable series of acts and reactions—here and there are events, such as the correspondence between overlays, that indicate her premeditation and forethought. We see this throughout the works that make up her current show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash: as Greenbaum's various materials, forms, and mark-making techniques converge and diverge, they are not just randomly added on top of one another, but are integrated into the paintings' compositions throughout. With time it becomes apparent that she builds up her compositions incrementally; her choices are not just a sampling of what can be done with paint, color, and line but, rather, a purposeful exploration of their compensatory nature. As such, through the interplay of forms, cutout shapes, negative spaces, and varied applications of media like oil, acrylic, and colored pencil, Greenbaum strikes a balance between chaos and order, dissonance and harmony. Yet, despite her expressionist and often nearly-inelegant doodle-like handling of elements, Greenbaum's layered compositions share some collage-esque similarities with synthetic cubism. With this in mind one realizes that her works exceed their historical or subjective meanings, and that by linking her subject—the diversity of painting—she offers a multifaceted exploration of painting's mechanics and the possibilities of abstraction.

Greenbaum's compositions decompose before the viewer's eyes as their disparate elements jostle and resist consolidating into a cohesive whole. These paintings are made up of layers of eccentric forms, scribbles, sketchy

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marks, sinuous curves, splotches of color, and linear patterns. These elements interact to create a sense of both mad and maddening organized chaos and fracture. The results are like a visual wrestling match in which Greco-Roman style, the WWE with all its showmanship, and the rituals of sumo all come together in the same ring, at the same time. Consequently, the visual "wrestling match" of her compositions, their layered forms, drawn and painted elements all occupying a complex pictorial space, reflects the conceptual wrestling match Greenbaum is engaged in with the contradictions, fragmentation, and unpredictability inherent in abstract painting itself.



Joanne Greenbaum, *Untitled*, 2024. Flashe, acrylic, oil, and marker on canvas, 65 by 60 inches. Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

Like most abstract painters—to one degree or another—Greenbaum is a formalist, yet her aesthetic model of formalism is not the essentialism of Clement Greenberg, the reductive standardization associated with Minimalism, or the emotive subjectivism of expressionism. Instead, it is an older one rooted in the nineteenth century Symbolists who viewed the abstract (the imagined) as a means to convey both subjective and psychological experiences—a way to stimulate those immaterial events which can only be intuited. In her effort to express such various states of being, Greenbaum uses her drawn and painted elements to create an all-over field of events that calls to mind Jackson Pollock's pre-drip paintings such as *The She-Wolf* (1943), *Mural* (1943) and *Guardians of the Secret* (1943).

That said, Pollock's paintings are entropic—they partake in the natural order's tendency towards stasis—while Greenbaum's fields are dynamic and full of individuated incidents. But one nonetheless gets a similar sense of spontaneity and lack of resolution from the paintings of both artists, even though Greenbaum's process is more deliberate and constructive compared to Pollock's, which is cumulative and ordered by chance. Jonathan Lasker is another artist Greenbaum's works call to my mind. Despite their styles being seemingly antithetical (his analytic and hers expressionistic), both approach abstract painting indexically and diagrammatically. They treat their imagery and physical processes as signifiers. But again, there are significant differences: Greenbaum's work privileges movement over stability and strives for a lack of logical resolution, where Lasker seeks the inverse. Yet

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for both this broader polarity stems from the dichotomy between the material and illusionistic (and allusionist) aspects of paintings per se. Subsequently, neither Greenbaum nor Lasker seek to render abstract painting's identity as a "pure form," instead approaching it as a heterogeneous region consisting of material and formal effects that evoke associative and analytic responses in the viewer. Where they differ most decisively is in the fact that Greenbaum is willing to engage the emotional as well as the conceptual.



Joanne Greenbaum, *Untitled*, 2024. Flashe, oil, acrylic and marker on canvas, Diptych; overall: 90 by 160 inches. Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

Greenbaum began working with ceramics in 2004, expanding her artistic practice. Her ceramic sculptures in the past have followed a similar intuitive and experimental approach as her paintings, which results in highly inventive, irregular forms. Working with a variety of ceramic materials, in the past she tended to focus on hand-building porcelain forms, whose white color permitted her to paint and draw on them. Yet the ceramics included in this exhibition serve as a counterpoint to the paintings rather than complementing them. While the ceramics have eccentric forms and a high-gloss, gunmetal gray glaze, they contrast dramatically with the paintings. This suggests that the relationship between the ceramics and paintings has shifted, as the ceramics now act as a foil to the "wildness" of the paintings.

Greenbaum's works, then, are not merely another academic lesson in formalism and the nature of abstract painting. Instead, the situations her works conjure up can be seen as analogous to real-world dilemmas and human experiences. Accordingly, her paintings do not offer simple resolutions. Instead, they embrace the contradictory, heterogeneous nature of both art and life. Her compositions resist easy interpretation or the promise of resolution in some vague notion of being about this or that—they do not surrender easily to analogy. The contradictory and often messy elements within her compositions mirror the contradictions and the complex, multifaceted nature of the real.

By embracing in her paintings the heterogeneous complexity of her situation, Greenbaum provides a metaphorical representation of the creative potential that can emerge from engaging with, rather than avoiding the contradictions inherent in our everyday experiences. Her work suggests that by embracing complexity and resisting easy resolution, we can gain deeper insights into the nature of art, life, and our own place within it. Interpreting her paintings as pictorial analogies or allegories allows for a richer, more nuanced understanding of her work, the world we live in, and our place within it.