

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

HYPERALLERGIC

The Unclassifiable Brilliance of Joanne Greenbaum

Fiercely independent, the artist belongs to no art group, movement, or style.

John Yau | June 10, 2024



Joanne Greenbaum, "Untitled" (2024), flashe, oil, acrylic and marker on canvas' diptych, overall: 90 x 160 inches (all images ©Joanne Greenbaum. courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York)

Joanne Greenbaum began making ceramic sculpture in 2004, after enrolling in a ceramics class at Greenwich House in New York City. By working in the medium before other artists of her generation (she was born in 1953), she signaled her commitment to the handmade. Over the past two decades she has created two impressive bodies of work side by side, ceramic sculptures and abstract paintings, which she began exhibiting in New York in the mid-1990s.

Greenbaum started her painting and ceramic practices with basic forms (line and slabs and coils, respectively), and she has been building upon them ever since. Throughout this time, she has never become formulaic. She has produced several paintings on prepared canvases, used a wide range of colors, employed permanent materials, such as marker, and created clay sculptures, all in a single sitting. And yet none of her works feel like they were made rapidly.

By refusing to pursue the pictorial, geometric, or gestural, or pick up where the Pattern and Decoration movement left off, while committing to drawing in paint, Greenbaum distinguishes her work from that of many of her peers. Fiercely independent, she belongs to no group, movement, or style; I have long admired her determination to make work without allusions to other artists, tropes (e.g., grids, parody, citation), or a shared experience. This is her clarion call for artistic freedom, and it made me excited to see *Scaffold*, her debut exhibition at Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

Greenbaum paints incrementally, discovering her composition as she proceeds. In a nearly square untitled work from 2024, red lines, ragged-edged swaths of turquoise, and angular maroon shapes sit atop a pink ground. The entanglement of the figure-ground relationship extends out of synthetic cubism, but does not rely on interlocking shapes within a shallow space. Echoes between shapes and colors abound in this painting. It feels as if the painting began speaking to her at a certain point, and she used this opportunity to create resonances among different parts.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



Joanne Greenbaum, "Untitled" (2024), metallic low fire glaze on terracotta, 9 1/2 x 10 1/4 x 10 3/4 inches

Bright yellow covers most of an untitled diptych, the exhibition's largest work. Unpainted areas at the top and bottom of the painting invite viewers to complete the composition in their mind's eye. Chaos and order race neck and neck, neither one overtaking the other. Lines of varying widths and saturations in a hothouse palette (yellow, turquoise, various maroons, reds, and oranges, traces of blue and green) create a complexly layered space.

Greenbaum's paintings are rhythmic, ruptured, fragmented, sinuous, splotchy, faded, solid, and sketchy. They are intuitively choreographed abstractions in which everything retains its identity while contributing to the whole. That tension between the individual mark and the incremental results attains a remarkable visual fluidity where nothing blends together, everything is scrambling, nudging, and bumping. It reminds me of riding a crowded subway car at Halloween. Nothing is quite as exhilarating as the activity in these paintings.

Five shiny, gunmetal gray terracotta sculptures placed on a table at the far end of the gallery serve as a counterpoint to Greenbaum's eight colorful paintings. These are breakthrough works for the artist. Two are architectonic stacks: One is made of rectangular slabs with a circular opening on all four sides, its six forms decreasing in size as the ziggurat-like structure rises into the air; the other suggests an architectural ruin, its shiny surface, punctuated by a pattern of balls along the base, seemingly worn down by time.

As with her paintings, Greenbaum's ceramics make clear that she is interested in structures. The difference is that these two sculptures are unitary, as opposed to the paintings' fragmented compositions. The glossy glaze undermines the material identity of these and the other sculptures; it obstructs our recognition that they are made out of clay. With these two pieces, the artist has opened up another path to explore.

This restlessness, which has been with Greenbaum since the outset of her career, along with her commitment to artistic freedom, are just a couple of the reasons that she deserves a mid-career survey and some real recognition from the art world.

Joanne Greenbaum: Scaffold continues at Mitchell-Innes & Nash (534 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 15. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.