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HYPERALLERGIC

A Truly Rebellious Artist

Is Joanne Greenbaum making fun of collectors' tastes, or is she enlarging the definition of art? The fact that you cannot tell is what is so great about her work.



by John Yau
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Joanne Greenbaum, "Untitled" (2018), oil, acrylic, neo-color and marker on canvas, 88 x 77 inches (all images courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery)

I will begin with [this statement](#) from Wikipedia:

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Benjamin Buchloh defines deskilling as “a concept of considerable importance in describing numerous artistic endeavors throughout the twentieth century with relative precision. All of these are linked in their persistent effort to eliminate artisanal competence and other forms of manual virtuosity from the horizon of both artist competence and aesthetic valuation.”

Buchloh’s definition divides artists into those possessing “manual virtuosity” (painters, mostly) and those who have ideas (conceptual artists, mostly). The reason I mention Buchloh on deskilling is because it struck me, when I went to the exhibition, [*Joanne Greenbaum: I’m Doing My Face In Magic Marker*](#) at Rachel Uffner (December 10 – January 12, 2020), how brittle his hierarchical thinking is.

By bringing together oil paint, acrylic, water-soluble pastel, and magic marker to make her images, Greenbaum collapses the distinctions between painting and drawing; “artisanal competence” and casual mark-making; and fine art materials and cheap hobbyist supplies.

For some time, Greenbaum has been using magic marker on large-scale canvases, challenging unspoken conventions regarding proper painting and drawing tools. But her individualistic approach doesn’t stop there, as I believe her project is more extensive and deeper in its implications than merely challenging art world conformity.

In 2004, Greenbaum enrolled in a ceramics class at Greenwich House, a non-profit community arts school in Manhattan’s West Village, which gave her access to a kiln and pottery materials. Uninterested in learning the right way to make vessels, she began making non-functional abstract pieces which she often painted and drew on, rather than glazed.

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Joanne Greenbaum, "Untitled," (2019), kiln-formed glass, 24 x 24 inches

In her current exhibition, Greenbaum shows 15 irregularly shaped abstract works made of brightly colored, kiln-formed glass. Typically, kiln-formed glass is used to manufacture ashtrays, bowls, jewelry, and other functional objects. As a point of comparison, the best-known glass artist is Dale Chihuly, who uses blown glass, as does the installation artist Josiah McElheny. Neither work with kiln-formed glass.

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As with her use of clay, Greenbaum has no interest in making something functional or predictably beautiful. Rather, the artist further extends the possibilities of her drawing practice by innovating with glass in a way that can be seen as the exact opposite of working with markers on canvas. In these works, she arranges pieces of colored glass on a sheet of transparent glass before firing it in the kiln, causing the pieces to melt and bond together. This method is related to her work with ceramics, but it is also completely different because nothing is shaped by hand.



Joanne Greenbaum, "Untitled" (2019), kiln-formed glass, 29 x 25 inches

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With kiln-firing, the results are not immediate, making it as indirect as markers are direct. In addition, the use of kiln-formed glass collapses the distinction between Buchloh’s “artisanal competence” and the paradigm of mechanical reproduction that Andy Warhol introduced into painting when he began using silkscreen. While Greenbaum’s glass pieces are unique, they could have come off a production line like some kind of oversized tchotchkes, but they have not.

By breaking down the distinction between art and kitsch, Greenbaum extends the borders of a domain first explored by Marcel Duchamp, which is the relationship between art and non-art. Is Greenbaum being satirical, making fun of collectors’ tastes, or is she being serious and enlarging the definition of art and what constitutes a painting? The fact that you cannot tell is what is so great about her work.

By making each glass piece in the exhibition distinct from one another – in both composition and color – we sense the breadth of Greenbaum’s freedom, playfulness, and joy. This is what sets her apart from her contemporaries, many of whom look positively puritan in their sense of duty toward perpetuating their style, brand, or meaningful content or commentary.

Along with adding kiln-formed glass to her repertoire, Greenbaum extends her painting practice by attaching small canvases to the surface of larger ones. In one painting dated 2019 – they are all “Untitled” – she adds two smaller canvases, arranged kitty-corner in the middle of the vertical rectangle, so that the bottom right corner of one touches the upper left of the other. Both are covered with sinuous black shapes perforated by vacuoles of red. These colors become abstract, appendage-like shapes that continue off the smaller canvases onto the larger support, whose center is unpainted white gesso, but whose outer edges are coated in yellow.

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Joanne Greenbaum, "Untitled" (2019), oil, acrylic and marker on canvas, 60 x 50 inches

In between, there is a semi-transparent green arch (or simulated brushstroke) serving as a border between the yellow outer edges and the white gesso, with its conflagration of black and red shapes. Across the unpainted gesso, flanked by the green arch and the black and red shapes, there is a cluster of short, thick marks in blue, orange, and plum pastel. As a final gesture, Greenbaum has graffitied the rest of the surface with wandering lines in orange marker.

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We can view the painting as an index of one artist's materials and varieties of marks, from wide and slow to thin and fast. Greenbaum underscores the porousness of boundaries by pushing the black and red shapes beyond the edges of the smaller canvases and onto the larger one. There is a high degree of tension between the constraint of the rectangle and the restless and relentless orange line as it circles, turns, and doubles back within the limits of the painting's physical surface.



Joanne Greenbaum, "Untitled" (2019), oil, acrylic and marker on canvas, 60 x 50 inches

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None of the nine paintings in the exhibition repeat their compositions or palettes. One painting is largely done in deep blue and black, while another is largely red and blue. In both of these paintings, Greenbaum incorporates other colors and materials to accent the dominant colors and use of paint. She can make blunt shapes, delicate lines, and orchestrate the dripping paint. The work can come across as frisky, bold, dogged, and grim simultaneously.

In contrast to many of her contemporaries who have established a set of constraints within which to work – and this can be a grid, choice of colors, size of the canvas, or even subject matter – Greenbaum seems intent on leaving no avenue unexplored.

Are certain celebrated artists really doing something new, or are they simply tweaking conventions enough to establish a signature style? This is the aesthetic that Greenbaum challenges. She has discovered the limitless possibilities of drawing in paint, accentuated by a freewheeling, comedic sense of freedom. Like Elizabeth Murray, with whom she studied, Greenbaum has raised the possibilities of abstraction to another level, and she should be honored for that. She does something unexpected, welcome, and necessary; she defines and occupies a singular place.

[Joanne Greenbaum: I'm Doing My Face In Magic Marker](#) *continues at Rachel Uffner Gallery (170 Suffolk Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through January 12, 2020.*