

Barry Schwabsky on Heidi Hahn

Barry Schwabsky | May 6, 2020



Heidi Hahn, *Folded Venus/Pomadad Sweater #3*, 2020, oil on canvas, 68 × 60". From the series "Folded Venus/Pomadad Sweater," 2019–20.

The first thing to notice about Heidi Hahn's paintings is the artist's adroit way with the fundamentals of the medium. Her handling of color, line, luminosity, and so on comes across as somehow both instinctual and analytical: Chromatic washes condense into emotional atmospheres, while swift gestural drawing elicits, rather than imposes, definition. Hahn makes mood palpable.

The second thing one observes is how indebted her loose-limbed figurative style is to that of Henri Matisse, in whose work that amalgam of intuition and intellect reached a pinnacle. This might be worrisome, as an awful lot of quasi Matisse and pseudo-Picasso is cropping up in the art of young painters these days. Often, that work is too enamored of its influences and too easy on itself to break any new ground.

Yet Hahn, for the most part, is finding her own way into painterly figuration not as a mere homage to modernism, but as an exploration of consciousness in the present. What makes the difference is partly a matter of viewpoint: The female protagonist of the series presented in this show, "Folded Venus/Pomadad Sweater," 2019–20, is not subject to the infamous male gaze, but is evoked in a way that seems based in proprioception. Although this personage (perhaps Hahn's avatar?) appears alone in all but one of the paintings—in *Folded Venus/Pomadad Sweater #4* (all works 2020), she's part of a crowd of women, all armed with oversize bags and looking as if they might be waiting to board a bus or train—she clearly has something on her mind. In #10, she's playing the loves-me-loves-me-not game with a devastated little pink flower; in #7, she can't concentrate on the book she's pretending to read—a single tear falls from her eye. Someone's gaze is missing—or being missed. But if Hahn's protagonist seems mopey and self-absorbed, her creator sees her with a humor that, sympathetically, understands the unrequited lover's unhappy consciousness as an unnecessarily self-limiting state of being. The sensuality of the paint itself and the wit with which the artist deploys it are smarter than her subject. Some paintings know, better than people do, how to make themselves seen on their own terms.

Hahn has described her work as "narrative formalism," suggesting that materiality and image can work in tandem to express something beyond the simple surface of the self. A painting of a person withdrawing into herself does not itself withdraw, but approaches just enough to lure you in. Probably the simplest and most direct of the eleven works here, *Folded Venus/Pomadad Sweater #3*, was one of the few in which the woman's gaze seems to directly engage the viewer. She cocks her head as if to fit it inside a painting that's a little too small to contain her. She opens her eyes inquiringly, as if to ask, "Who are you, and what do you see in me?" But in truth, she might only be addressing that question to herself. I take the arched space in which she stands to be not a doorway but a mirror. The painting can't tell us who she is or how she feels—a narrative formalism can never be all that narrative—but it can beguile us into asking those questions of ourselves.