

What I'm Looking at: Michael Rakowitz Makes a Meta-Monument, the Debate Over 'Art Without Men,' and Other Things at the Edge of Art

Highlights from New York galleries and the art magazines from the last few weeks.

Ben Davis, September 22, 2023



Matjames Metson, *A Tower* [detail] (2023) at George Adams Gallery.
Photo by Ben Davis.

“What I’m Looking at” is a monthly column where I digest art worth seeing, writings worth reading, and other tidbits. Below, thoughts from the end of August and the beginning of September.

Tower of Power

The favorite thing I've seen recently is [this sculpture](#) by [Matjames Metson](#), shown solo in a back room at George Adams Gallery in New York (on view through October 28). *A Tower* (2023) is a seven-and-a-half-foot-tall garage-art labor of love, made over the course of 14 years. The altar-like object has a handmade exuberance to it, and a Joseph Cornell-esque interest in antique photographs and psychically charged bric-a-brac.

It's full of scrappy flourishes: little pocket knives displayed in tiny windows, details made of pearl buttons, rows of sharpened pencils that resemble Gothic ornament, collaged bits of old love letters salvaged from estate sales. *A Tower* seems to be a structure almost literally built out of memories of a world of tactile creativity. It's just very fun to spend time circling it, looking for all the little secrets Metson has nested within all its crannies and compartments.



Matjames Metson, *A Tower* (2023) at George Adams Gallery. Photo by Ben Davis.



Matjames Metson, *A Tower* [detail] (2023) at George Adams Gallery. Photo by Ben Davis.

Catching up to Kené

I only know about Sara Flores's abstractions what I read in the gallery material for her show, "Soi Biri," at Clearing (on view through October 22): that the artist hails from the Shipibo-Conibo people of the Peruvian Amazon; that the artworks draw on *kené*, a visual language of intricate, all-over, maze-like designs; that the vibrating patterns connect symbolically to the characteristic hallucinations seen in an ayahuasca ceremony; that the finished paintings are meant to have healing properties; that their medium, "vegetal pigments on wild cotton," also suggests a closeness to nature.

The backstory is important, though I think that if you look at Flores's artworks, you do feel immediately that they are more than just patterns. The works I like best at Clearing are those like *Untitled (Shao Maya Punté Tañan Kené 1, 2023)* (2023), where the individual areas have the most differentiation, while still maintaining the impression of a total repeating whole. In general, their effect lies in a first perception of a rigorously harmonious overall order that, upon closer examination, reveals itself to be constructed using a grammar of individual marks that do not repeat. That particular balance does feel like it naturally reflects a particular intuition about the cosmic order.



Sara Flores, *Untitled (Shao Maya Punté Tañan Kené 1, 2023 (2023))* at Clearing. Photo by Ben Davis.

A Monument to the “Monument Conversation”

At Jane Lombard, Michael Rakowitz’s Frankenstein’s Monster of a sculpture, *American Golem*, is a gawky anthropomorphic assemblage formed of fragments of other sculptures, models, maquettes, and artifacts all related to public artworks. On each element, Rakowitz has scrawled some text, noting facts about the monument it relates to, the materials’ origins, and the historical and contemporary debates it is caught up in. As a whole, it’s a memorial of the heated debates over what gets celebrated in public, turbo-charged by the big protests of 2020.

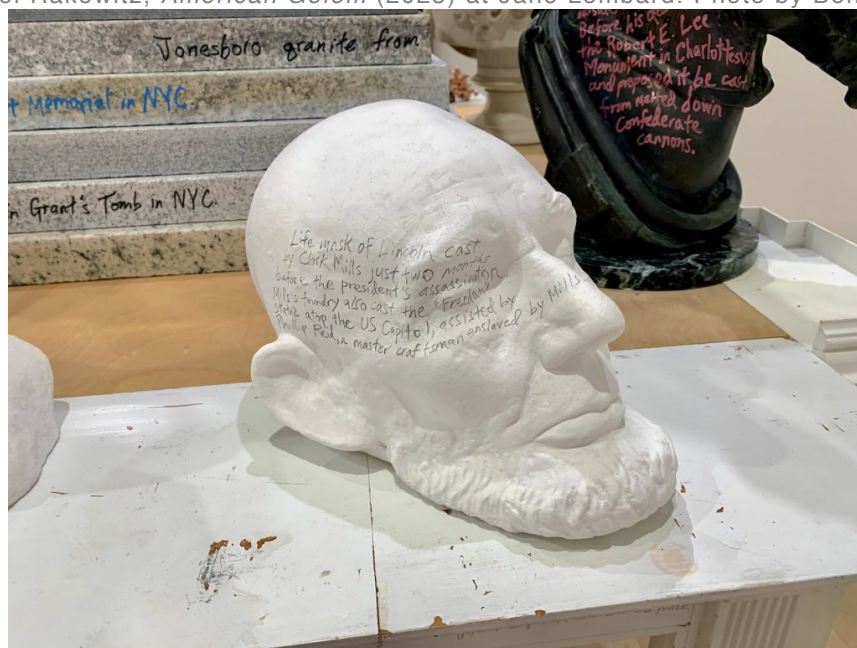
You might do a reading of *American Golem* where the didactic, late-conceptual graffiti elements aren’t just commentary on the past but also one more layer in a critical history of how monuments express power in the United States. The “monument conversation,” after all, has been *both* a needed reckoning with history *and* a way for

liberal metropolises to deflect attention away from more intractable issues and into conciliatory public art commissions.

Maybe that's me reading against the grain of Rakowitz's interests—although the accompanying sculpture *Behemoth*, a black tarp that ceaselessly inflates into a monument-sized mass and then deflates, does convey a low-key ominous sense of a conversation stuck in a loop.



Michael Rakowitz, *American Golem* (2023) at Jane Lombard. Photo by Ben Davis.



Michael Rakowitz, *American Golem* (2023) at Jane Lombard. Photo by Ben Davis.

Cinema of Forgetting

I just missed writing about *Let's Talk* at [Brooklyn's experimental art hangout Kaje](#) before it closed—but it's still worth remarking on because [Simon Liu](#) is one to watch.

His fragmentary images may feel a bit hard to orient yourself within. It helps to know the project Liu has been working on in previous works: to capture, via a kind of memory-collage effect, how images of Hong Kong are remembered, forgotten, and change meaning as the actual texture of the city itself shifts in the wake of the recent political crackdown. With that framework in mind, the unmoored quality of *Let's Talk's* floating fragments becomes more and more poignant.

One thing about Liu's work that rewards your attention is how the multiple video channels of his installations repeat the same images across different surfaces—but also diverge at moments. Suddenly, if you're paying attention, one channel seems to be leading the other, or an alternative version of a scene starts playing out, sometimes almost without you realizing it. That's another way that *Let's Talk* feels like being inside the mental process of trying to reconcile multiple images from the past into one thought, even as its meaning slips away.



Simon Liu, *Let's Talk* (2023) at Kaje. Photo by Ben Davis.



Simon Liu, *Let's Talk* (2023) at Kaje. Photo by Ben Davis.

Peak Pike

I can't get these raw wooden sculptures by [Shana Hoehn](#) at [Jack Barrett Gallery](#) out of my head (they are on view in a two-person show called "To Look is to Eat," alongside Yan Xinyue, through October 21). Honestly, how great is *Pike II* (2023), this image of a folded woman's body draped impossibly across a swan's neck like a scarf? This kind of folk-surrealist carpentry vibe is just very fun to watch an artist play around with.



Shana Hoehn, *Pike II* (2023) at Jack Barrett. Photo by Ben Davis.

The Story of Art Without Men Lacks More Than Just Men

Worth clicking into: critic Jillian Steinhauer’s balanced but sharply deflating review of Katy Hessel’s *The Story of Art Without Men* from *The New Republic*. Steinhauer finds a certain impressionistic quality to the facts within Hessel’s much-touted counter-history. She also points out that the origin story for Hessel’s entire Instagram-account-turned-podcast-turned-book—a visit to a 2015 Frieze Masters where Hessel says she was stunned to realize that “not a single [artwork] was by a woman” turns out to have a certain exaggerated-for-effect, Hassan Minhaj quality to it (Louise Bourgeois, Carmen Herrera, and Bridget Riley were all big sellers that year).

But really, Steinhauer is using the reception of *The Story of Art Without Men* to get at something bigger: the relationship—or non-relationship—of pop feminist art history to the robust, complex, critical, decades-long legacy of serious feminist art history, and the question of how much is being lost in the meme-ification of its insights. (Who can forget the high-end “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” fashion line of a few years ago?) Steinhauer argues that the way that Hessel treats artists’ stories, through a lens “tinged with the boosterism of girlboss feminism,” means that they all start to sound the same, even as consequential differences among women go untalked-about. And basically, she just thinks we should demand more, after a half century of feminist scholarship, than this.



Katy Hessel attends the Mango Loves London celebration of the new London flagship store on November 11, 2021 in London, England. (Photo by David M. Benett/Dave Benett/Getty Images for Mango)

The “Painting, Painting, Painting” Moment

If I told you I went to the Armory Show earlier this month, looked around, and mainly thought “wow, that’s a lot of painting!”... well, I would only be repeating exactly what Jerry Saltz said earlier this year about Frieze New York. The fact that we’re stuck with this thought is part of this problem, but it’s true. If you walk around all the galleries right now, what you will see overwhelmingly is painting, painting, and more painting— and mainly mid-sized, colorful paintings.

You can say that there’s always been lots of painting. Painting is the ur-gallery art. True—but the present state of affairs is kind of analogous to how, for a long period, people were complaining about how Hollywood was putting out so many sequels and superhero films—and then suddenly there was a moment where it really was like, wow, *everything* really is a sequel or a superhero movie, and anything riskier than that really does feel as if it’s shriveling away.

Don’t get me wrong, I like painting. Painters are cool. Every time I go out, I see painting I enjoy. But art’s an ecosystem, and ecosystems need species diversity.

What does it mean? My guess is that it represents a flight to the safety of the easiest sales pitch: art as investment-grade décor. Given the deep economic queasiness behind the scenes in the art world right now, that is how I am interpreting the “painting, painting, painting” moment, rather than as a real renaissance of contemporary painting. It’s an odd effect—all this genial, colorful painting expressing all that nervousness underneath.



Luce Gallery at the 2023 Armory Show VIP Preview at Javits Center on September 07, 2023 in New York City. (Photo by Sean Zanni/Patrick McMullan via Getty Images)

<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/what-im-looking-at-michael-rakowitz-katy-hessel-2366203>