
Stoked from dying embers, painting’s classical revival—a rediscovery and return to traditional technique—has been burning underground for decades. Last month the new masters emerged to exhibit with the old in “The Unbroken Line,” at Robert Simon Fine Art, on New York’s Upper East Side.

One of our best Old Master dealers, Robert Simon has a history of rediscovering lost masterpieces—he’s the one who owned and helped re-identify the Salvator Mundi as a painting by Leonardo. Now working with the teachers and students of the Grand Central Atelier, the classical art school in Long Island City founded by the painter Jacob Collins, he helps us discover the next master painters. “The Unbroken Line” exhibits a selection of Old Master work alongside paintings by Collins and his current and former students, the best of whom have gone on to become the faculty of his growing school.

Robert Simon has a history of rediscovering lost masterpieces. When it comes to revivals, living matter does not necessarily come to life from dead tissue. The thesis of “The Unbroken Line” is that a knowledge of classical painting, as it was once taught in the academies and practiced in the salons, never fully died out in the style wars of the last century. It was preserved by a handful of painters—and in the masterly work that, at least for now, continues to hang on the walls of our museums, and in galleries such as Simon’s own.

The revelation of “The Unbroken Line” is that this must be true. Or, at least, it has become true as a new generation of painters, many of them only in their thirties, breathe new life into a reviving practice. It would be a challenge for anyone to go through Simon’s survey of forty-eight works and distinguish, with total accuracy, which are from the seventeenth century and which are from
the twenty-first. This is in part due to the freshness and depth of Simon’s own collection of Old Master paintings and drawings. *A Performance from the Commedia dell’Arte set in a Piazza*, by Gherardo Poli (b. 1676), can hang naturally alongside the wonderful drawing of *Santa Maria Maggiore*, by Anthony Baus (b. 1981), with an archaic street scene fancifully interposed with someone walking a bicycle.

[Image of a painting by Will St. John, untitled, 2018, Oil on linen, Robert Simon Fine Art.]

It is inspiring, and eye-opening, to see still lifes by Sebastian Stoskopff (b. 1597) and Joris van Son (b. 1623) living next to ones by Justin Wood (b. 1982). *Portrait of a Young Man*, by Simon Vouet (b. 1590), and *Christ Blessing*, by Vittore Carpaccio (b. ca. 1465–70), settle down inconspicuously among portraits by Collins himself (b. 1964)—one of which, called *David*, Collins touched up just
days before the opening. Emotive figures by Rachel Li (b. 1995) and Will St. John (b. 1980) give the side-eye to a Portrait of a Boy from the Bolognese School of the seventeenth century. (I understand that St. John gave his painting a final coat of varnish once on the wall, in what Simon says was his first literal vernissage.)

Delicate portraits by Colleen Barry (b. 1981) convey a Flemish intimacy. A self-portrait by Edward Minoff (b. 1972), an accomplished painter of seascapes, radiates the classical profile of a Renaissance medallion. Just steps from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, this exhibition has introduced a new field of collectors and curators to a generation of young painters; the great Frederick Ilchman, a curator at the mfa Boston and a savior of Venetian art, was on his way up just as I was heading down. The work, old and new, comprises two sides of the same coin. Robert Simon has done a good turn by bringing them both into more common currency.

Now entering his ninetieth year, the latitudinal painter Paul Resika has sailed the seven seas of artistic influence. More than sixty years ago, he embarked from the New York School and his apprenticeship with Hans Hofmann for a rendezvous with the Old Masters, on to the distant shores of De Chirico, Carrà, Sironi, and points unknown. With his latest exhibition, “Geometry and the Sea,” spread across two New York galleries last month—Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, on the Lower East Side; and Bookstein Projects, now on East Sixty-sixth Street—Resika brought home his many far-flung discoveries in angular, poetic compositions, where paint serves as both water and light.2

At Bookstein’s new uptown location, the open gallery room invited comparison of these connected compositions, all from the past three years. Among the circles and triangles, the sea and the sky, Resika finds a great range of feeling in shapes and tone. Rose Dawn (2017) crackles in a morning sun. Red Dunes, Green Sea (2016–17) bakes in a sun-scorched afternoon glow relieved by the sea water pooling into a triangle below. The yellow sun of The White Sky (2017) breaks through a damp mist, while Red Sun (De Chirico) (2017), with its vertical symmetries, conveys the meridian sun with a nod to the surrealist master. Meanwhile, Blue Night (2017) turns day to night with the coolness of moon-shade, as pyramidal forms grow ever taller in the dream-lit air.
In his intimate downtown space, Steven Harvey looked to the poetry of Resika’s mysterious forms and their spare surroundings. *A Quiet Romance* (2017) features a circle and a shell in conversation over a field of blue. *The White Moon* (2017), *Celadon Sea* (2017), and *Blue* (2017) convey Resika’s interest in sensuous, mottled color. In a gallery filled with natural light—as it must be, for Resika’s colors—the illumination from the storefront window highlighted the textures of Resika’s layered surfaces. These latest paintings are often painted over older work, and the *pentimenti* add to the mystery of the compositions. *Self-Portrait with Rag* (2017) depicts Resika emerging from the color-rich mist. The great painter looks out as both an abstract vision and a concrete form.

*Paul Resika, Blue Night, 2017, Oil on canvas, Bookstein Projects.*

Using planes of color, de
Using planes of color, de Montebello carves out sculptural space. The approach is spare and often intriguingly minimal. While certain works experiment with fog, de Montebello flourishes in the bright light of day, with direct sunlight sharpening his shapes in reflection. A room of intimate works, some of casein or oil on paper, brought to mind the spare vision of Louisa Matthiasdóttir, where a field of green might be punctuated by a mere dot of red.

Marc de Montebello, View of Jodhpur, 2015, Oil on canvas, W. M. Brady & Co.

Two large canvases reveled in the rooftop geometries of Jodhpur, the “blue city” of Rajasthan, dominated by its fifteenth-century Mehrangarh fort. Yet the chromatic values of these paintings were so varied, and the effects of light so wide-ranging, that they might be mistaken for two different views—especially as they were wisely divided between the two main gallery rooms.

In the familiar light of Los Angeles, where de Montebello keeps his studio, he seems most at ease. Here he finds interest in simple rear-window walls and a series of seascapes—which is his most daring—conveying an infinity of depth with a minimum of surface detail.

The dozen or so galleries of 56 Bogart Street, in Bushwick, Brooklyn, have arguably evolved into the single best concentration of artistic venues anywhere in New York. No doubt this is
due to the galleries’ proximity to one another — and their separation from everything else. In the late nineteenth century, the economist Alfred Marshall described certain places as “having ideas in the air,” where knowledge “spills over” from one person to the other. The central corridor of this one building, packed with serious galleries and the people who create them, has become the Main Street of New York’s alternative art scene.
Spread over six weeks, these gallerists came together to organize “Sculpture 56,” their first building-wide exhibition, with eleven venues showing various takes on contemporary sculpture. Highlights of this exhibition included a bespoke stack of Jersey barriers in “Noah Loesberg: Remote Barrier Storage,” at Robert Henry Contemporary (the co-director Henry Chung was an architect of the exhibition series). I also enjoyed the many examples of contemporary ceramics at Honey Ramka, where Julia Kunin’s unsettling Green Bismuth Head (2013) was my best in show. At Slag Contemporary, Dumitru Gorzo piled old two-by-fours like matchsticks into square towers. Their natural precariousness said more to me than the scumbles of paint added to their surfaces—I wonder if a more minimalist application would have had greater effect. Meanwhile Tom Butter, at Studio 10, constructed an eleven-foot-tall kinetic sculpture, where a mechanized spool of foam cord unwound from a lattice tower onto a pile on the floor. For all the elegance of its construction, I doubt the resulting forms quite justified the elaborate setup.

Spread over two floors at 56 Bogart Street, the dense, multi-gallery exhibition, much of it showing work at a high level, commanded attention. I hope it hints at collaborations to come.

The photographer Meryl Meisler arrived in New York City in the mid-1970s. Surrounded by decadence and decay, she looked for the humanizing touch in the wreckage, the sleaze, and the schmaltz of the struggling city. Through a 1978 ceta Artist grant to photograph Jewish life for the American Jewish Congress, she turned her lens on the Lower East Side. Continuing our rediscovery of Meisler’s rich body of work, these photographs are the subject of “les yes!,” an exhibition at The Storefront Project, a gallery on Orchard Street at the heart of a neighborhood that has transformed in the four decades since Meisler captured it in black and white.
Meryl Meisler, Mr. Katz was mugged by two kids who found him dozing in front of his TV in his living room, 1978, Photograph, the Storefront Project.

Meisler has an eye for character. In her photographs, often shot in fifty millimeter with heavy flash, great expressions come into bloom for her welcoming lens. Bright-faced rabbis, soda jerks, and garmentos pop out of their darkened shuls, diners, and apparel stores. There are a few striking images of degradation — a drunk lying across the bleak median of Photographing on the Bowery (1977), with a second figure snapping away from the side of this captivatingly framed image. Yet, mostly, Meisler looks for the life of the street and those struggling to keep living in it. In particular she finds Morris Katz, the self-proclaimed “Mayor of Grand Street,” who appears in several images. Looking out from two black eyes, Katz describes “how he was mugged by two kids who found him dozing in front of his TV in his living room,” as one of the images is titled. Resolute and resigned, he does not let his cigar drop from his mouth or his bow tie come undone. The old neighborhood is in decline. He was there to see it through. Thankfully, in the dying light of the late 1970s, Meisler was there as
well to find what could be preserved.

1 “The Unbroken Line: Old and New Masters” opened at Robert Simon Fine Art, New York, on May 11 and remains on view through June 1, 2018.

2 “Paul Resika: Geometry and the Sea” was on view at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, New York, from April 18 through May 20 and at Bookstein Projects, New York, from April 19 through May 26, 2018.

3 “Marc de Montebello: Recent Work” was on view at W. M. Brady & Co., New York, from May 9 through May 24, 2018.

4 “Sculpture 56” was on view at 56 Bogart Street, Brooklyn, from April 13 through May 27, 2018.

5 “les yes!” opened at The Storefront Project, New York, on May 3 and remains on view through June 3, 2018.

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