Raúl de Nieves at Freedman Fitzpatrick

September 20 – November 3, 2018

I had just finished the chapter about Times Square in Vanishing New York before stepping off the bus onto the still-tawdry eastern edge of Hollywood Boulevard. Freedman Fitzpatrick's gallery is in a two-story strip mall just a few blocks from the start of the walk of fame—or on the fringes of tourism's exhaustion. Hollywood, at least for a few blocks, maintains a kind of Times Square lite vibe—appreciably scuzzy, sometimes outright scary, if not as strange as the "Hollyweird" captured in the 1980 film Foxes with its buskers, hookers, and dogs wearing sunglasses.

In Freedman Fitzpatrick's main, and only, room, six bedazzled little figures in platforms disperse, preening and gesturing, maybe towards each other or maybe at something unseen. Seemingly alien-human hybrids with cherubic faces, encrusted, or engulfed, head to toe in plastic beading, they could've wandered in from a few decades ago. They have monosyllabic, sassy-teen names—Evie, Rosha, Bethany (all works 2018)—all registered on the image list for The Guide, Raúl de Nieves' first solo show at the gallery. Their daring haircuts and dated, if not archaic, platform shoes evince 1970s glam—that is, glamour with the corners cut. These creations of de Nieves elephant-stomp their way

into the ice-cool business of the contemporary art world with a curiously refreshing kind of garish bad taste though I wonder where it is within contemporary art that they might actually go.

The bright, brash, and cheap, pushed to the point of circus-like surreality, has as its conceptual underpinnings the idea of reinvention. One might then read de Nieves' works as the manifestation wholly in costuming, accessorizing, and plumage—of a formerly latent identity. Aside from the smaller sculptures, the singular, larger Psychopomp looms in the corner, laden with tassels and vintage trim. Electric blue mannequin hands reach out from under the weighty, fancy folds of fabric, and a skirt of rocks surrounds the figure's pooling yarnwork. On the wall, black and white charcoal drawings on vellum show clown-y faces and figurations; the elaborate make-up and costuming in each often bleeds into abstract geometries in the background.

These drawings, all titled Fool(I, II, and III), alternate with panels encrusted with yet more plastic beads, each evoking something between stained glass and a Lite Brite board. Summer, one of the panels, could be a pool scene—blue and green sections divvied up along meandering lines like light shining through water. In the lower left, tight beadwork forming the face of Disney's Cinderella floats, her image static and doll-like. Similar faces appear in the other panels, including that of the devil (Autumn) and a witch (Winter). Each of these faces lurk in meandering

fields of color and shape, suggestive of aerial landscapes. Each also contains a beaded disk of varying color, which might be read as a sun or planetary body. By contrast, the charcoal drawings, though sinister, point at something perhaps more tender—the composition of a self, exaggerated and even monstrous, constructed layer by detailed layer until recognition of the original begins to blur, the process overwhelmed by its culmination.

Something more disquieting comes to mind when considering de Nieves' ostensible subject—the resourceful formulation and expression of an entirely new, weird self—and the way in which the artist brings it into being through the manipulation of easily available, cheap, and abundant plastics. All the beading and hot glue in de Nieves' works inhabit a contradiction in the simplest way—heavy in look, light in weight, and, art being in part in thrall to the discerning eye, one might get a cheap thrill out of identifying so much cheap material. Yet whether he intends it or not, his employ of these plastics contributes directly to their supply and demand. (Reeling somewhat from the onslaught of plastic in the show on the bus ride home, I added a note about recycling to my Grindr profile.) De Nieves' works are thus inorganic in an almost asphyxiating way.

Reinvention as a conceptual ground is a kind of perennial, relatable identity politic. The press text consists entirely of a poem speaking to fear, contemporary anxiety, and

the desire to create a new self not through meticulous work but through the drama of a sudden leap: "...the only thing I want to do / is jump / so that I could / float / maybe so / I will come out / a new self." Perhaps it is axiomatic to note that the narrative here, in achieving its explicitly personal appeal, is entirely self-centered in its consideration of anxiety, unwilling or unable to comprehend the holistic, global impact and ethical conundrums of individual decisions.

Also, the ornate ostentatiousness of de Nieves' work comes not from a leap, but from hours of tedious care, as if divining some aspect of the authentic self from laboring over the base ingredients of the false. Authenticity lies somewhere in this soup of class, performance, surrealism, and intricacy. But de Nieves ultimately cloaks the specter of the authentic, leaving it a tacit, unseen structure on which wild fantasy figures instead.

Gertrud Parker at Parker Gallery

September 16-November 3, 2018

In Gertrud Parker's painting Belvedere (2017), the fanged head of a tiger floats disembodied against a deep blue background, looming over a brushed-in bespectacled blond (a stand-in for the artist herself). This perplexing self-portrait, which hangs alongside seven others, sets the tone for a group of works that toy with the notion of self-portraiture and the mercurial nature of

subjectivity. Parker, who is the grandmother of gallery owner Sam Parker, grew up in Vienna before fleeing Nazi occupation in the 1930s. She now lives in the Bay Area where, since the 1980s, she has made sculptures out of gut skin, or mammalian organ tissue. That textural materiality translates to her recent paintings, each of which are rendered in a thick encaustic, a new medium for Parker, formed by adding pigment to heated wax.

There is a funny tension at play in the works they are stylistically in dialogue with early European modernism while simultaneously invoking the convention of self-portraiture in feminist art as well as more recent notions of selfie feminism. For example, Looking in the Mirror (2018) is, most simply, a mirror selfie. Unlike the other works in the show, which only utilize paint, the center of this work is a collaged photograph of the artist holding up an iPhone to take a picture of herself. This image is embedded in a wobbling painted bathroom scene replete with sink, tiles, and a potted plant that reminds equally of your Instagram feed, David Hockney's Man in Shower in Beverly Hills, George W. Bush's shower self-portrait, and Maria Lassnig's mirror drawings from the mid-'70s. Parker's playful framing of her own bathroom selfie merges her own gaze with the viewer's, an early feminist strategy of making oneself both object and subject.

In the other selfportraits, Parker's image is much more allusive, nearly anti-photographic. In *Shin*gles (2017), Parker paints herself standing against a shingled backdrop, in which the gridded shapes behind are painted in sloppy encaustic detail. Parker's own face is barely articulated. Thin, blurred dabs and strokes of color stand in for eyes, nose, and mouth. In almost all the works, her face is painted flatly, directly on the panel—giving it a barelythere quality in contrast to the thick encaustic that forms in dimensional masses around the figure. Moreover, in Shingles, the artist's entire body is painted with a shimmering paint that further emphasizes her phantasmal quality. Parker's self-portraiture flirts with self-erasure, or more precisely, with illegibility, the impossibility of imaging oneself. To this point, in another painting titled Veil (2017), the edges of Parker's body are barely delineated from the abstract forms of the background so that she seeps into the painting and vice versa.

In another work, With the Artist's Sculpture (2018), Parker's face hovers large behind an abstracted form in the foreground that, the title indicates, is a sculpture. Just as Parker's self-portraits are unstable or illegible images of the self, we can extrapolate from this particular painting that the artwork itself is an unstable representation of the artist. Parker is calling into question an artwork (which many have theorized is itself always a self-portrait) as a stable reflection of its maker.

Belvedere, then, takes on a new valence in relation to these other paintings. If this is a continuation of her exploration of reflections of

the self, might we infer that the big cat is a fractured part of herself? Parker suggests that both the artwork and the self are rife with capacious and uncontrollable meanings. The more we try to make stable images of ourselves, the more they get away from us. Importantly, in Parker's hands, the unstable self doesn't feel like a crisis. The work's playfulness is a necessary component of the kind of exploration that doesn't seek absolute answers or stable meanings. In placing a disembodied tiger, a mirror selfie, and her own sculpture side by side as self-portraits, Parker probes the myriad ways we try to fix and monumentalize our own subjectivities. Taken together, Parker's self-portraits are fragments, never allowing the subject to resolve into a mythologized whole.

Robert Yarber at Nicodim Gallery

September 8 – October 20, 2018

What I would give for a time machine that could transport me back to Venice, Italy, in the summer of 1984. That year, at the Biennale, an exhibition titled Paradise Lost/Paradise Regained: American Visions of the New Decade had been commissioned for the United States Pavilion by the New Museum's firebrand director, Marcia Tucker. Along with figurative painters such as Charles Garabedian, Roger Brown, Judith Linhares, and the Reverend Howard Finster, it included a young Oaklandbased artist named Robert Yarber, whose nocturnal oil

painting of a glowing motel pool and a couple falling past a high-rise window (*Double Suicide*, 1983) launched him into the public eye.

In recent years, Yarber somewhat disappeared from view, although an autumn exhibition at Nicodim endeavored to change that. Return of the Repressed revolved metaphorically and literally around the motif of the fall—a Biblical theme that was also central to Paradise Lost/Paradise Regained although in most instances it is impossible to discern whether Yarber's figures are falling or flying. In the earliest painting in this show, Regard and Abandon (1985), a man and a woman (always a man and a woman, here) embrace, midair, hundreds of feet above a city on a bay. He nuzzles her shoulder; she turns her face upwards, serenely, as if savoring the nighttime air. The scene is almost still, as in the blissful instant before the plummet begins. In Error's Conquest (1986), there is a bit more movement—her skirt billows around her—but the couple might as well be dancing. In each painting, far below, the blue rectangle of an illuminated swimming pool awaits their splashdown.

Yarber makes narrative paintings that are hard to definitively decipher. If they are suffused with Christian iconography—not only man falling but also ascending, along with intimations of airborne seraphim and cherubim—the paintings themselves are defiantly amoral. The broad intimation is that self-abandonment, or letting oneself fall, may be the surest possible route to

ecstasy. In relation to the 11 powerfully atmospheric paintings selected for Return of the Repressed, his career-making work, Double Suicide (not included in the show), seems oddly prescriptive—even narrow—in its fatalism.

When Yarber is at his most thrilling, he paints with a cinematic vividness that borders on the hallucinatory. He convincingly transports us to another realm, one that is in some senses realistic and in others utterly fantastical. In his paintings from the 1980s he lays down sharp-edged white outlines of smoothly rounded forms over pitchblack grounds. In the subsequent decade, the forms become sharper, smoother, and more vivid still, as if to compensate for their increasingly outré content. In Séance with False Medium Trumpet Call from the Beyond (1993)—one of the few earth-bound scenes in the exhibition—we see three people around a table, eyes closed in concentration. A fourth man is blindfolded, gagged, and bound with thick rope, a long hunting horn stuffed into his mouth. Is this latter figure a metaphor for the artist, the composition an expression of doubt or remorse for his painterly trickery? If so, that seems like an important message to get straight. I never do, quite. Along with another bombastic, circular canvas from that same year, The Magus of Turin, this is the most narrative work in the show, but also the point at which I begin to lose the thread.

Yarber has been painting in a broadly consistent style for over three

Nikita Gale at Commonwealth & Council

September 22-November 3, 2018

A screeching sound pulsates on an electric guitar. The music in artist Nikita Gale's video Descent (2018) resembles the first thrums of a warm-up—the way an instrument seems to clear its throat and announce itself before the song begins. Through a cacophony of distortion, echo, and feedback, the artist's voiceover recites a quiet, matter-of-fact story about the fraught nature of her own last name and the politics of naming. She discloses a secret even those close to her do not know: Gale is a commonly used middle name on her mother's side of her family and not her legal surname. She is Nikita Gale [name redacted]. A loud bleep drowns out her last name whenever she utters it.

Gale's erasure of her last name is a gesture of patrilineal refusal, a technique of evading association with a father whose contact is infrequent and unwelcome. A surname signifies a code, a means of identification in order to update an administrative file. If naming represents order, casting off a name is then a form of resistance, and in a sense, of hiding, or disappearing and slipping through the cracks. She posits a new mode of expression in not simply adapting her own name, but in refusing to make this self-given name her legal

name. While naming is highly personal, in the end, it is all garbled bureaucratic verbiage anyways. While in her video Gale speaks both at length and out loud, she mixes her voice with raucous sound; there is a contradiction in her work between positions of noise and of silence. Where making noise is so often the typical course of resistance—free speech, picketing, even screaming or crying out—here Gale insists on the power of silence.

Likewise, the surrounding sculptural forms in the exhibition—metal grates, steel screens, cement, foam, and terrycloth structures—allude to silencing, dissent, resistance, and themes of impenetrability. Household objects used for sound blackout surface in Gale's sculptures. Tangled bath towels, cement, twisted foam-familiar objects often affixed to walls to drown out noise—dangle off Descent Movement I and II (2018). These odd pieces recall both a laundry line in their verticality and a fenced off, private location. Though not restricting, one feels enclosed within this field of grey and metallic objects. Surrounded by pieces that meditate on the idea of sound and its amplification or muffling, the work becomes a sharp study in opacity.

Nearby Descent
Screen (2018) is a metal
barrier that bisects the
sculptural works on one side
of the room and the blaring
video on the other. The group
of sculptures in this outlined
zone have a tendency to
droop, to lean—a choreography of metal bars and
jutting microphone stands,
encircled in a space that is at

decades, and his facility with his medium is readily apparent. Every picture is picked out, in high contrast, by neon-hued highlights against a black ground. At my most ungenerous, I might say that there is a touch of Bob Ross or velvet-painting-kitsch about some of his work; his techniques are effective, though formulaic. At his best, though, Yarber soars with virtuosic, confident brushwork, as in Vista (2018) in which a man gazes out over an orange harbor while a female sprite appears to dance in the air before him. In a couple of the new paintings, Yarber loosens up with more provisional gestures and mists of sprayed acrylic, and, perhaps because of their scale (they are 11 feet wide), they fail to pack the punch of the tighter,

earlier work. What draws me to Yarber's painting, both new and old, is largely nostalgia; it seems to belong to another time—though a time still fraught with its own set of buzzing anxieties. That is by no means to the work's detriment; whoever says great art is timeless is full of platitudinous shit. Art can (and maybe even must?) be anchored to the moment of its conception and still telegraph across time. Datedness does not equal obsolescence. Yarber's work has probably always existed in an elsewhere: the elsewhere of cinema, of science fiction, of fever dreams. Today, we feel more than ever the work's remoteness from reality, but retreat gladly into its darkness.

once a stage with life-size speakers, a prison cell with bent bars, and an alley of hanging laundry lines. Most striking are the foam earplugs patterned into the holes on a metal bar grate, a Morse code rendered with the material accoutrement of silence. Jammed into this grate, these plugs allude to the messages, names, and rules that the artist refuses both to abide by and to hear. The earplug is a way to drown out that noise, to turn toward one's innermost reflection and thoughts.

Gale performs an unusual feat in amplifying silence, dwelling in places where it seems there is no noise at all. In her video, she considers her abandoned last name, asking "what difference does it make to know that something has been dropped if you never knew it was there to begin with?" Her disinterest and her deliberate deafness speak to the oppressive weight not simply of her name and the patrilineal system of naming, but to the weight of history. Using sound dampening objects in her sculptural works, she endeavors to drown out the stories and the pain of the past, her own name among them. The loud video bleep rings again, another redaction, another use of powerful silence.

Lari Pittman at Regen Projects

September 15-October 25, 2018

Western History is the story of great men, or rather, rich and powerful men, who often turn

out to be not so great. Their supposedly noble exploits are well-documented throughout millennia of art history commissioned portraits, altarpieces, and distinguished busts. But alongside, or perhaps underneath, this dominant strain of visual propaganda, there is a more nuanced and contested chronicle based on material culture, much of it created by women—objects, tools, folk art, and textiles. This is the conceit behind Lari Pittman's latest show at Regen Projects, Portraits of Textiles & Portraits of Humans, which uses pattern and decoration to tell stories of violence, corruption, inequality, and social tumult.

Each of the large (approximately 6×7 foot) canvases in the show is named for a specific fabric— Crushed Linen Velvet, Damask, Glazed Chintz—and features a repeating pattern made up of floral motifs, geometric designs, and stylized objects loaded with connotations (bags of money, nooses, clamps) that form ambiguous but suggestive narratives. In Portrait of a Textile (Brocade) (all works 2018) for instance, a series of black axes float atop an angry red background of flowers, alluding to the violent overthrow of a polite social order. The diagonal composition intensifies this sense of turmoil. A tiled arrangement of cartoonish purple portraits are covered by large sickles in Portrait of a Textile (Reversible Jacquard), alluding not only to the hope (and brutality) of proletariat Marxist revolution, but also to the dangers of the totalitarianism that followed. Portrait of a Textile (Art-Deco Toile de

Jouy) contrasts golden keys with sickly black flowers—
fleurs du mal as opposed to the stately fleur-de-lis—on a blue and green ground.
Beneath the gilded veneer of luxury, lineage, and legacy, the dark side of inbreeding and nepotism reveals itself.

Pittman's patterns are not perfectly repeatable. Remarkably, all are created by hand, with no computer or even preparatory sketches to aid him. That process enlivens the compositions, leaving small but noticeable discrepancies that keep our eyes moving. Pittman employs spray enamel and vinyl-based acrylic, taping and stenciling to produce a surprising range of effects that recall the revolutionary in form and content designs of Stepanova as much as the mid-century textiles of Alexander Girard. The seductive, high-keyed color scheme and dancing patterns mask the grim subject matter, allowing it to creep almost subliminally into our consciousness. These refined aesthetic tropes disguise a challenge to the very order they represent.

Paired with each fabric archetype is a much smaller human portrait, linked to the larger canvas through color scheme and decorative elements. Instead of specific names as with the textiles, these are identified solely by Ancient Greek words: Pathos, Ethos, Logos, Kairos, terms associated, respectively, with the rhetorical appeals of emotion, ethics, logic, and opportunity or decorum. Compared with the dynamic, monumental scenes hanging beside them, the intimacy of these images comes off as



Raúl De Nieves, *Evie* (2018). Image courtesy of the artist and Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles/Paris. Photo: Marten Elder.



Gertrud Parker, Looking in the Mirror (2018). Encaustic with gutskin and collage on panel, 18 × 10 1/4 × 1 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles.

folksy and humble. All angular forms and flattened planes, these portraits resemble works by German Expressionists concerned with the alienation and isolation of the individual in modern society. Pittman's portraits picture individuals whether they are aristocrats or peasants—eclipsed by the larger forces depicted in the textiles. The images are captivating, but the faces are distorted, haggard, worn-down, or ghostly. In

In focusing on patterns and objects, Pittman's decorative Marxism puts forth a view of history as shaped by movements and struggle rather than the exceptional feats of individuals. The empires of great men are replaced by anonymous women's work. As opposed to the more starkly didactic quality of much revolutionary artwork, Pittman embeds his critique within the language of the ruling class—fine fabrics and conventionally attractive easel painting—making a more nuanced, complex statement. That the results can be so filled with visual pleasure is testament to Pittman's skillful subversion.

contrast to typical portraits

questions as to the subject's

status, origin, or even gender,

presenting a more honest, if

confounding, story. They are

recognizably specific but

hopelessly anonymous.

of great men, they eschew a clear-cut narrative, raising

(L.A. in N.Y.) **Eckhaus Latta** at the Whitney Museum of **American Art**

August 3-October 8, 2018

I went to the Whitney and all I got was this conceptual t-shirt. The premise of the Eckhaus Latta retail exhibition at the Whitney, like the nonexistent t-shirt, left me empty handed. I couldn't afford the hand-painted beaded skirt or the sweatshirt screen printed with poetic text, but I enjoyed taking a free selfie in the doublesided mirror, framed by an embroidered assemblage. When I posted the image on Instagram a friend commented, "capitalism can be such poetry sometimes."

Designed as an interactive retail shopping experience highlighting the work of Eckhaus Latta, the New York and Los Angeles-based fashion label, Possesed was not quite an art show but was 100% a store, equipped with clothing racks, display tables, and hanging garments for sale. The installation, which was tucked into a gallery space behind the Whitney's elevators, was organized into three zones and claimed to address the culture of consumerism and the intersection between art and fashion—at least this was what the beautiful shop clerk told me.

The first zone featured a series of light boxes with

standard marketing images: a stockinged foot pressing an onion to the floor was juxtaposed with a shot of a model flipping her dyed-orange hair. The second room was the store, speckled with a collection of clothing (again the swan-like attendant) "curated for this moment." Despite a flimsy conceptual premise, the display was quite beautiful. The walls were painted a fragile and muted Tiffany blue and a curated playlist hummed through the space. Each garment featured a clear plastic card which read, "SPECIAL MUSEUM EXHIBI-TION PRODUCT," along with a cardboard-brown price tag. A knit sweater vest bejeweled with jade stones was \$3,250 (only \$2,925 for museum members!) and a pair of socks was \$75, a price point reserved for the well-heeled. For a work of art, that's somewhat affordable, but for high-end retail, that's on the upper register.

All the mirrors in the store were double-sided and alluded to a third room, which was themed on the "culture of voyeurism and surveillance." Here one could watch unwitting strangers in the second gallery trying on sunglasses in a theater-like atmosphere. On the wall, an installation by Alexa Karolinski featured a series of CCTV videos looping all at once, and showed the footage from every camera installed on the grounds of the Whitney. It was a neat trick that didn't thrill: here, the surveillance state was one we imposed on ourselves.

Eckhaus Latta: Possesed on the whole self-critiqued with low risk and low overhead. The politics of consumer culture were highlighted but the nebulous space between art and commerce was left to the consumer, or rather, the average museum guest, to untangle.

How crucial is it that art distinguishes itself from fashion? The exhibition included 20 works of contemporary art that were interspersed throughout the showroom (including works by Jesse Reaves, Torey Thornton, Martine Syms, and Matthew Lutz-Kinoy). Even as every element of Eckhaus Latta: Possesed was custom, bespoke, and couture, finding the actual art on view—aside from outfitting the room as a matter of novelty and design-proved difficult. DREAMS in a Paralytic Ileus (2018) by Amy Yao was listed on the accompanying wall text as a trash can and functioned as one. Glazed in beach tones, her ceramic sculpture wrapped its knotted, branchy arms around the circumference of a plastic waste bin filled with an empty seltzer bottle and a discarded museum ticket. When I asked for a check list, the shop clerk explained that each garment had a price tag. I meant the artwork, which wasn't listed for sale. This was a museum after all. Still, it was difficult to imagine these artworks outside the context of the store. Textile Curtain for dressing room (2017-18) by Susan Cianciolo, for example, was a patchwork dressing room curtain made with plastic shower curtains, cotton, silk, and paper. It was exactly what it said it was. Both Mike Eckhaus and

Zoe Latta, the namesake designers behind the brand, are included in the artist roster, further blurring the liminal space they created with this store-like exhibition, at the intersection of fashion and contemporary art. When art is both self-evident and utilitarian it defies categorization, especially when it refuses to replicate itself as commodity. The parasitic nature of the project's conceptual framework disallowed the gorgeous garments and accompanying artwork to truly embody their own conceptual space.

The promise of rarity, of possessing a one-of-a-kind piece plucked from an exhibit in a museum, adds to an item's retail value. Much of the machinations behind contemporary art have become indistinguishable from that of a luxury brand. High-end retail makes the garments less touchable, while wearables (in art) make an artwork more touchable; Possesed rested somewhere in between. Being of the moment is an opaque but urgent concern for fashionistas and for would-be contemporary art stars, both concerned with overlapping economies, both concerned with a certain brand of social capital.

The elegant shop clerk was interrupted by a customer:

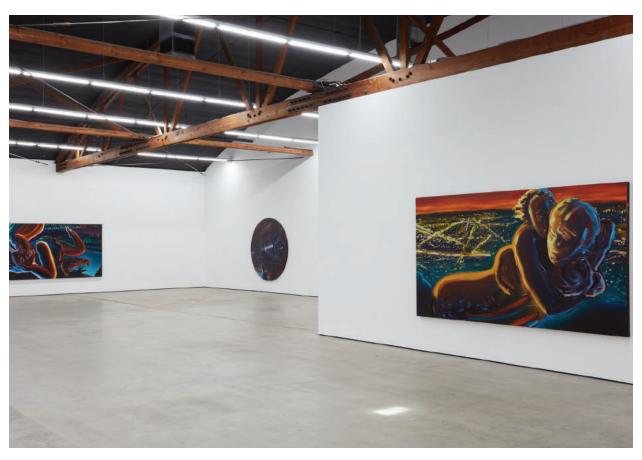
"Where is it possible to buy something?" a woman asked, pointing to the rings.

"Here," the radiant shop clerk replied, gesturing to the room.

"Here...right here?" she asked.

"Here," he said, "in the gallery."

He moved his silver-painted nails from their resting position on the counter and gingerly lifted a plexiglass dome, like the lid of a cake stand, to reveal glittering bits of jewelry. As he listed the price of a ring, the bass of the music deepened and swelled, denying me from hearing the astronomical price.



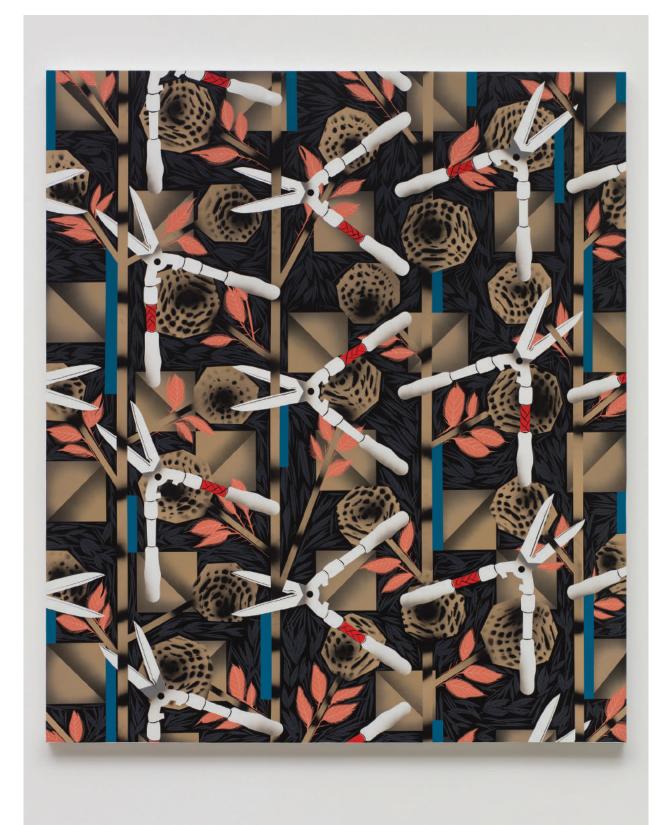


Robert Yarber, Return of the Repressed (installation view).
Image courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery.
Photo: Lee Thompson.

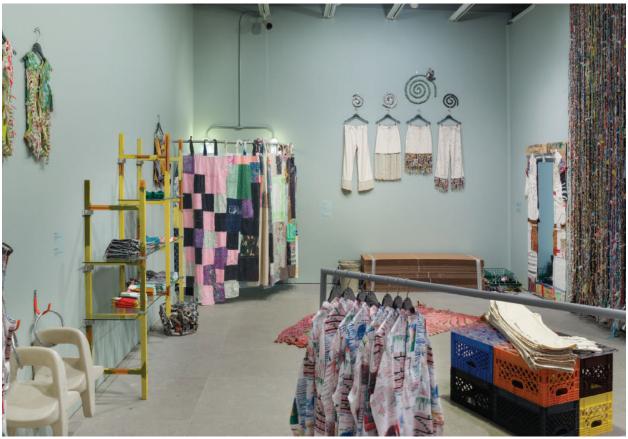
Robert Yarber, *Regard and Abandon* (1985). Acrylic on canvas, 72 × 96 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery.



Nikita Gale, DESCENT MOVEMENT I (2018). Steel, cement, foam, towels, 66 × 40 × 7 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth & Council.







Eckhaus Latta: Possessed (2018) (installation view). Image courtesy of the Whitney Museum. Photo: Jason Mandella.

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