

ART • WEEKEND

Joanne Greenbaum's Amazing Parties



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Installation view of "Joanne Greenbaum, New Paintings and Sculptures" (2016) at Rachel Uffner, New York
(all images courtesy Rachel Uffner)

Joanne Greenbaum began making tiny sculptures out of Sculpey in 2003. The following year she enrolled in a ceramics class at Greenwich House, a non-profit community arts school in Manhattan's West Village. The class gave her access to materials and a kiln, but she didn't want to learn the right way to make ceramics, and wasn't interested in making vessels. I can imagine the teacher and fellow students in her adult education class being bewildered by the non-functional, abstract pieces she made.

Most of the early ceramics were relatively small, able to fit inside your hand. Now, nearly fifteen years after she enrolled in the class, Greenbaum has made larger, multipart sculptures out of porcelain, air-dried clay, and cast aluminum that liberate an odd structural beauty from folded, twisted, looping and slab-like forms. Most of the porcelain and clay sculptures are painted and drawn on in unexpected ways. A group of recent sculptures and paintings (all made in 2015-16) — including what I believe is the largest painting the artist has made to date — can be seen in her first-rate exhibition, *Joanne Greenbaum: New Paintings and Sculptures* at Rachel Uffner (May 20 – July 1, 2016).



Joanne Greenbaum, "Untitled" (2016), sharpie on porcelain and stoneware, 13 x 11 x 9 inches

Greenbaum's interest in diverse materials as well as her resistance to learning the right way to use them are central to her work. I suspect that the artist made "Untitled" (2016), to fit on the far wall of the gallery's first floor, which has high ceilings and a skylight. Done in oil, acrylic, Flashe, ink, oil crayon and marker on canvas, the painting measures 145 x 135 inches, and is the largest work of hers I have seen exhibited in New York. An incremental artist who keeps finding ways to add something unexpected, in "Untitled," Greenbaum lays down ultramarine cutout shapes extending inward from all four sides of the painting. The deep blue shapes – with white (or unpainted) lines cutting through them – become something to work with, against, and around. The shapes evoke comparison to jigsaw puzzle parts and irregularly cut pieces of scrap metal.

There is also a large, pink, peanut-shaped cloud in oil crayon occupied by two small red irregular rectangles containing a black shape in their center. This pink, vertically oriented, semi-transparent, cell-like structure is located in the middle of the painting, near the top, setting in motion a dialogue with what's around it. There are also yellow bands and shapes, networks of meandering pink and green lines, clusters of variously colored, feathery brushstrokes, and a smattering of dot-like shapes.



Joanne Greenbaum, "Untitled" (2016), oil, acrylic, Flashe, oil crayon, and marker on canvas, 145 x 135 inches
(click to enlarge)

The white ground of "Untitled" is close enough to the gallery's white wall that I wondered what it would be like if Greenbaum started making paintings on the wall. "Untitled" is like a party full of well-dressed adults, scruffy adolescents, lounge lizards and children in fluffy pink pajamas, all talking brilliantly at the same time. By spanning the hierarchy that distinguishes the sophisticated brushstroke from the child-like scribble, the artist dissolves the borders separating one kind of mark making from another. This is what I find so refreshing about her work. She is not trying to pass as an outsider or graffiti artist. Rather, she is bringing all these possibilities and mark making materials into play. She has opened up painting's doors and invited everyone to come in.

And, as with any party full of brilliant conversationalists, there is always the one person who says something that gets everyone's attention. Greenbaum is a tightrope walker crossing over

pandemonium; she courts chaos but never descends into it. In another painting called "Untitled" (2016), which is in the upstairs gallery, a swarm of colored brushstrokes moves into and over colored flat shapes, like a horde of hungry beetles. In a number of paintings both upstairs and downstairs there are a row of evenly spaced drips running down the painting's surface, like a beaded curtain.



Joanne Greenbaum, "Untitled" (2016), oil, acrylic, Flashe, ink, marker on canvas, 80 x 80 inches

Greenbaum's genius resides in her ability to bring all kinds of binaries into play, without making them look contrived, collaged or quotational. Everything plays off what's around it. If you can imagine one half of a dancing duo doing the waltz, and the other doing the rumba, and the two of them twisting around each other like friendly snakes, then you get an idea of what Greenbaum can do in a painting.

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Whereas her first ceramic sculptures might have seemed less interesting than the paintings she was doing at the same time, the recent one constitute a distinct body of work within her expanding oeuvre. While they are decidedly not vessel, some of them resemble a vintage planter trying to escape its identity. Greenbaum further complicates this by applying gouache, or ink, or marker, or crayon – usually only one – in ways that don't correspond to the smooth folds, irregular strips, rectangular slabs, and jagged forms that she has put together. As with the paintings, Greenbaum collides things together – in this case, form and color – attaining a mysteriously melodious cacophony.



Joanne Greenbaum, "Untitled" (2016), oil, acrylic, ink, oil crayon and Flashe on canvas, 60 x 50 inches)

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In many of Greenbaum's works, one sees the seeds of something that could become either a style or a formula. There are characteristics that seem uniquely hers – the row of evenly spaced drips, or the use of paint and marker in the same composition. However, as the paintings and sculptures in this exhibition make evident, she is too restless and questioning to settle into a set of predictable moves. Moreover, she repeatedly proves that she will do anything to keep the party going, including interrupting or covering parts of it over. Of course, this is why parties can be so interesting, so full of life and anarchic energy: they are not well-oiled machines. Her unruliness connects her to the Abstract Expressionists, but, in her case, there isn't any trace of nostalgia or melancholy. I wish I could say that I am amazed that no museum in America has given her an exhibition.

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