

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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OBSERVER

The Art-Making Trend Outshining Large-Scale Sculpture in New York City's Best Shows

By Paddy Johnson • 06/10/19 12:48pm



Installation view of Elias Sime's exhibition, 'Noiseless,' at James Cohan. Copyright Elias Sime 2019. Image courtesy the artist and James Cohan, New York. Photo by Phoebe d'Heurle.

In Chelsea, bigger is not necessarily better. Each month, the neighborhood reliably serves up at least one show of giant minimalist sculptures destined for warehouses and corporate atriums. Pace valiantly took on the task this month, delivering a series of three black Tony Smith geometric forms so large they threatened to swallow the gallery—and any viewer—whole. Damián Ortega did his part too, at Gladstone Gallery, with a series of enormous sand piles, human-sized freestanding blobs made of clay bricks, and an helix-shaped sculpture. It is a rumination on time and culture but through the creation of forgettable relics.

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What would make these sand piles better? Put a pattern on it. That's not my solution, but an art-making strategy I notice myself responding to more. And based on what I'm seeing in galleries across the city, I'm guessing I'm not the only one. Pattern is everywhere.

To get a sense of this, look no further than Elias Sime's exhibition at James Cohan. Sime builds monumental wall sculptures out of discarded computer parts, the detailed webs of flattened wire and keyboard keys merging together to form vast mountainous landscapes. And at Gagosian, Jonas Wood's paintings of lush interior gardens made with a vivid palette feature passages of heavily worked patterning that vacillate between representation and abstraction. Terry Haggerty, meanwhile, presents ribbons of painted blue lines over the walls of Sikkema Jenkins.



Installation view of Elias Sime's exhibition, 'Noiseless,' at James Cohan.
Copyright Elias Sime 2019. Image courtesy the artist and James Cohan,
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These works succeed—and there's far more strong work on view than I've listed above. Jordan Belson's small psychedelic-inspired works at Matthew Marks and Minnie Evans' colored pencil renderings at The Kitchen are just two off those shows. Even artists who aren't known for patterning have started to incorporate it. Josh Smith introduces stencils into his new paintings at David Zwirner—the paintings aren't exactly heavily patterned, but remarkable for the complexity of color and paint handling skills I once questioned in his earlier work.



A work from Ron Nagle's exhibition 'Getting to No' on view at Matthew Marks. Ron Nagle

The strongest art and shows, however, evade the pattern trend. Twenty-six architecturally inspired ceramic sculptures by California master Ron Nagle at Matthew Marks blow every other show in the neighborhood out of the water—all without the use of a repeating motif. The works resemble avant-garde desserts. They're generally made up of a base defined by an applied texture—glaze, clay, gold flake—and something on top, like an orb, a cube or a sheet of transparent glass. No more than six inches high, these intimate, contained works vibrate as if sheltering a kind of electric energy.

While, right now, small-scale sculpture succeeds and large-scale sculpture fails, painting might be another story altogether. In the Danese/Corey group show "In the Summertime," Deborah Brown's large painting of a nude in the water with dogs stands out for its brisk brushwork and hazy warm evening sky. To see the most striking paintings in Chelsea, though, head to Hauser and Wirth for screen prints on gessoed fiberglass and wood up to 30 feet in size by Lorna Simpson. Using inky washes of sapphire blue, licorice black and slate gray to depict black figures and ominous skies, the images feel like a kind of screen burn. They lingered long after I'd left the neighborhood.