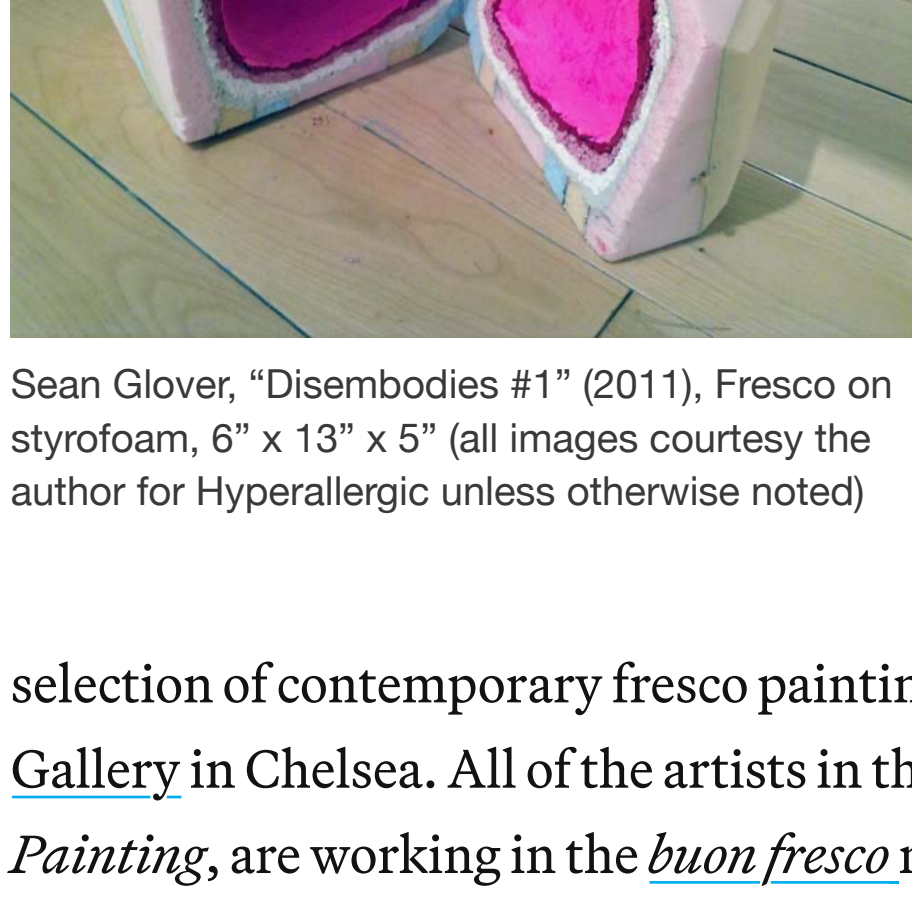


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Contemporary Fresco That's Off the Wall

 Patrick Neal November 10, 2014

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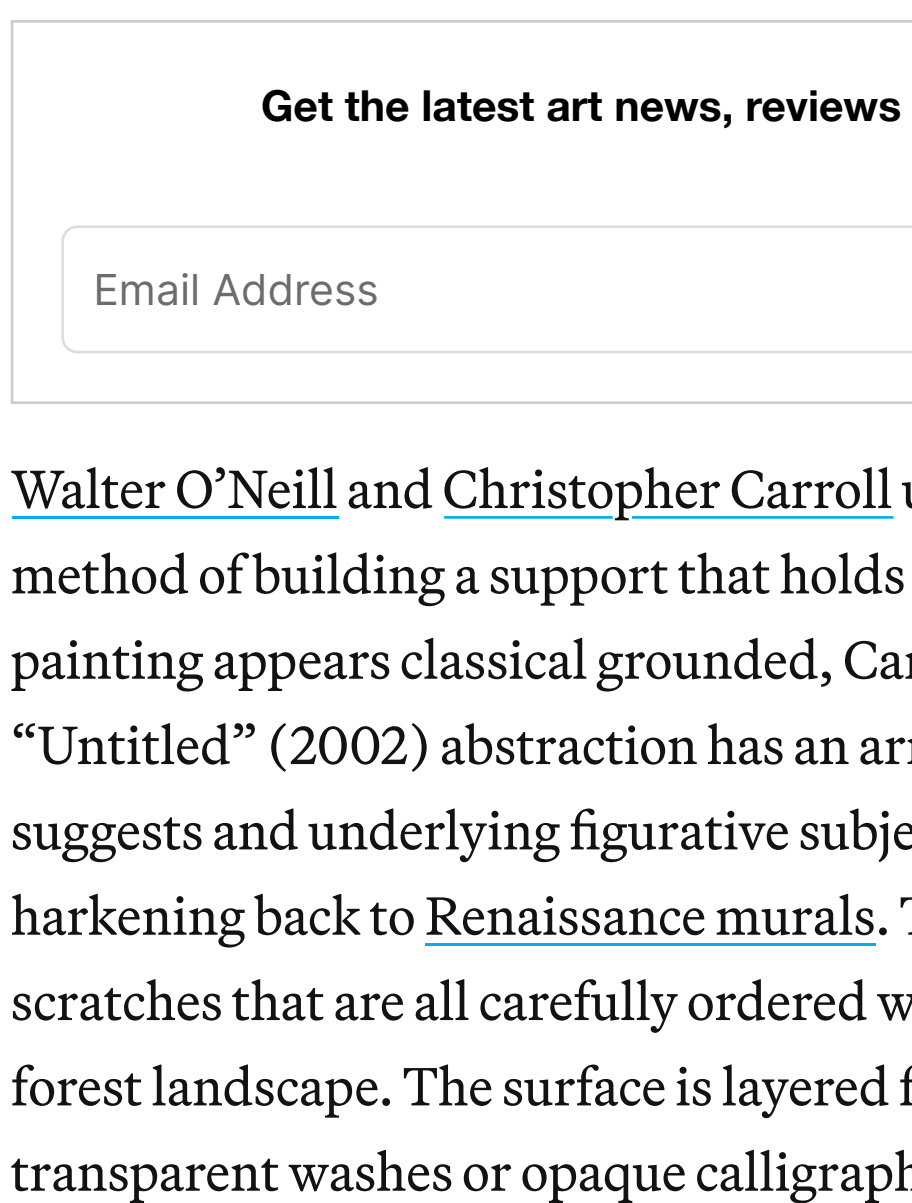
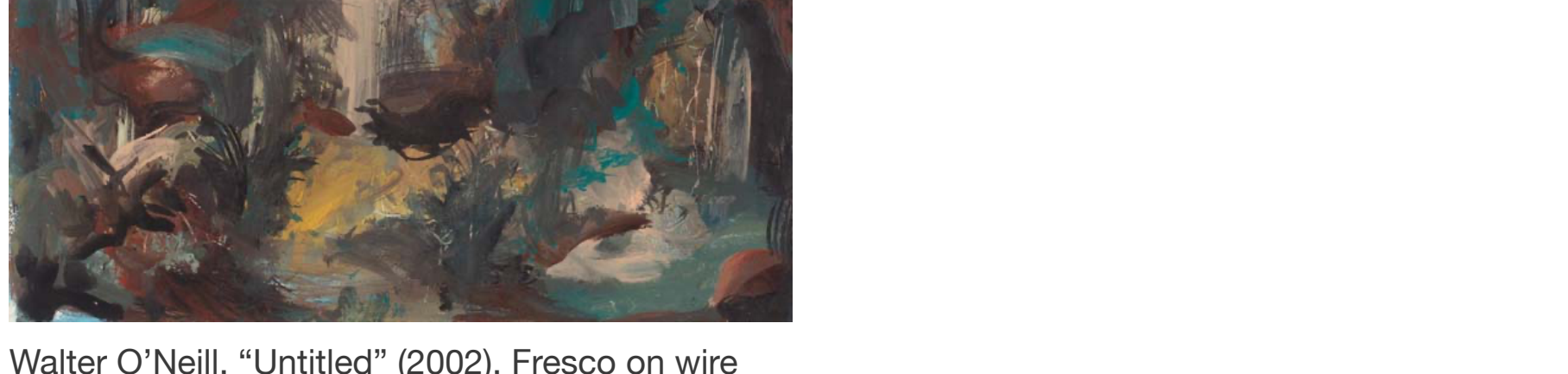


Sean Glover, "Disembodies #11" (2011), Fresco on styrofoam, 6" x 13" x 5" (all images courtesy the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

It isn't often one comes across fresco paintings in art galleries, the last time I remember seeing a sizable number was the "Rooms" section of the Francesco Clemente retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in 1999. This was around the same time the artist Joyce Kozloff had begun her ongoing series of fresco paintings of maps inspired by ancient cartographers. So it is something of an opportunity to view the varied

selection of contemporary fresco painting currently on view at Hudson Guild Gallery in Chelsea. All of the artists in the exhibition, titled *Off the Wall: Fresco Painting*, are working in the *buon fresco* method, a process that is chemically complex and involves a high degree of craftsmanship and sure-handed skill.

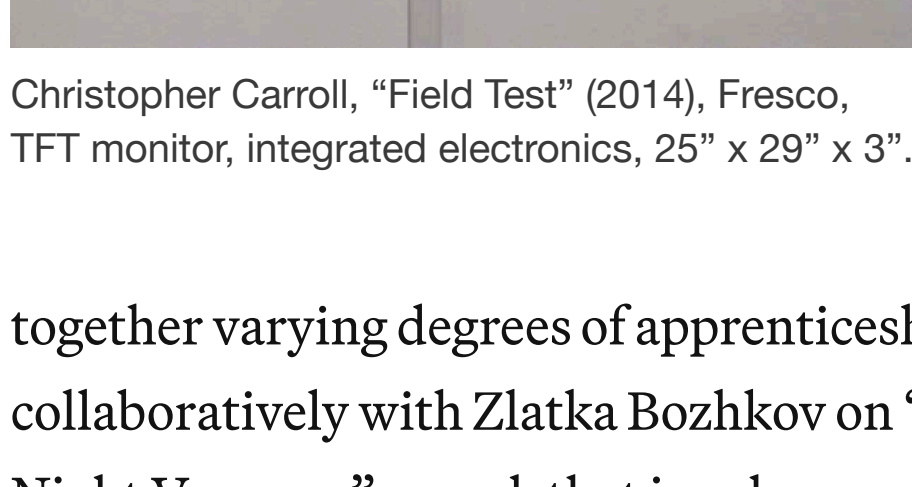
Buon fresco requires the practitioner to work wet on wet, applying water based pigments on top of a damp layer of lime-based plaster. An artist will work within a period of limited duration as the paint and plaster base set and dry and become inextricably bound together in the process. The crystalline glow of the colors that are unique to fresco comes out of this sensual process where the plaster acts as both binder and support for the paint.



Walter O'Neill, "Untitled" (2002), Fresco on wire mesh on wood, 24" x 24", (courtesy Walter O'Neill).

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Walter O'Neill and Christopher Carroll use a straightforward traditional method of building a support that holds the plaster but whereas O'Neill's painting appears classical grounded, Carroll has absurdist leanings. O'Neill's "Untitled" (2002) abstraction has an array of gestural strokes and sweeps that suggests and underlying figurative subject and radiates an air of reverence harkening back to Renaissance murals. The work has assured brushwork and scratches that are all carefully ordered with the shades and atmosphere of a deep forest landscape. The surface is layered from broad and loose strokes to lightly transparent washes or opaque calligraphs, smoky greys on top of brighter mustards, greens, blues, venetian red, and flesh tones.

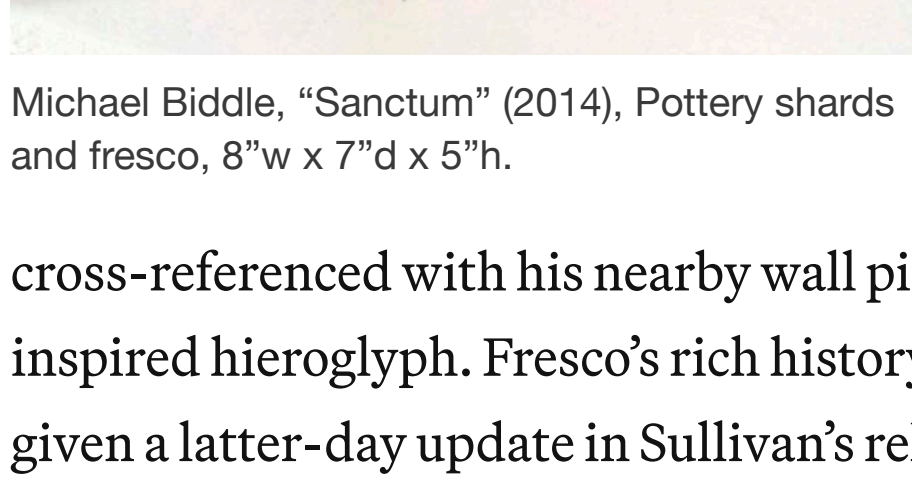


Christopher Carroll, "Field Test" (2014), Fresco, TFT monitor, integrated electronics, 26" x 29" x 3".

Carroll's work titled "Field Test" (2014) demonstrates the unlikely pairing of fresco with integrated video and computer components. Its central motif is a Penrose Triangle, an impossible geometric structure that never quite connects, and the eye ricochets between the deep blue of the triangle to the irradiated computer screen that hovers in the upper left corner. Pondering the collisions between what is natural, ancient, or mediated, the work emits a sense of longing frustrated by disconnection.

Also working with odd juxtapositions is Daniel Bozhkov, an artist known for conceptual projects that weave

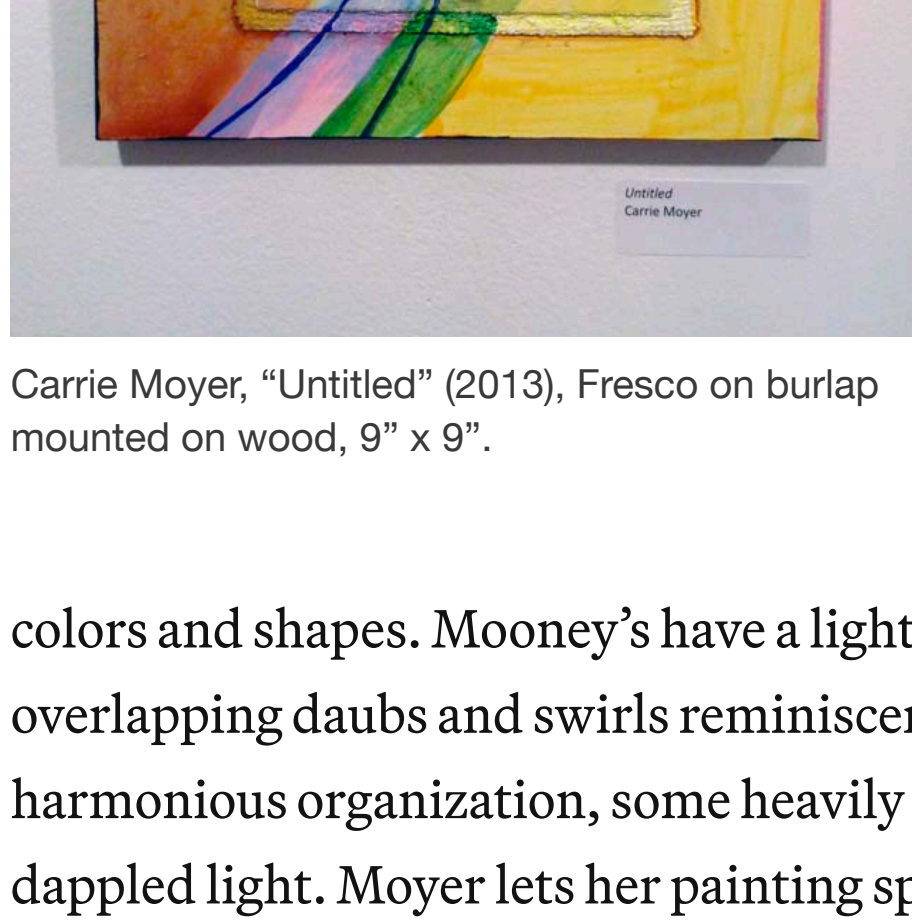
together varying degrees of apprenticeship, politics, and craft. Here he works collaboratively with Zlatka Bozhkov on "Hypothesis for Two Needles and a Night Vacuum," a work that involves squared off raw plaster and brushy paint with touches of embroidery. The support is approached from two different ends by completely different artisanal practices. With this piece and Bozhkov's nearby *Block 36* there are traces of appliances, ducts or vents that may suggest either cozy domesticity or depersonalized industry.



Michael Biddle, "Sanctum" (2014), Pottery shards and fresco, 8" w x 7" d x 5" h.

Biddle's small sculptural mound "Sanctum" (2014) is made of pottery shards of the sort that you would find on an archeological dig and could be

cross-referenced with his nearby wall piece "Tumble," a sort of Hairy Who-inspired hieroglyph. Fresco's rich history as a means of spiritual storytelling is given a latter-day update in Sullivan's reliefs of an Eames Chair and Noguchi Table. The furniture springs to life against the white wall of the gallery like idols embodying the modern worship of brands and labels.

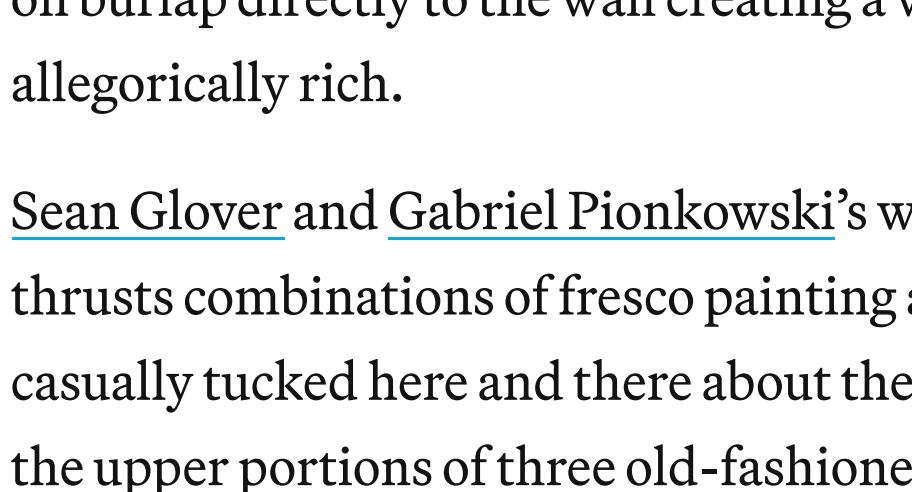


Carrie Moyer, "Untitled" (2013), Fresco on burlap mounted on wood, 9" x 9".

The artists in *Off the Wall* marry subject matter and technique to the intrinsic qualities of the fresco medium. In this way, gestural abstractions tend to work well considering the time constraint involved. Carrie Moyer, Maria Walker, and Elizabeth Mooney all affix burlap to an underlying board, capitalizing on the simple beauty of the fresco pigments and all three artists create abstractions that appear to be nature inflected.

Mooney and Moyer's works are all untitled and populated with punchy

colors and shapes. Mooney's have a light touch and washy bleed with overlapping daubs and swirls reminiscent of foliage and sky. The marks have a harmonious organization, some heavily applied and frontal while others evoke dappled light. Moyer lets her painting spill off the plaster sheath to the underlying wood support and around the sides and in doing so there are changes in texture and light. The paint is rigorously applied and her shapes are graphic with patterns within patterns and exclamatory marks that feel like snapshots of a larger, scrambled scenario.

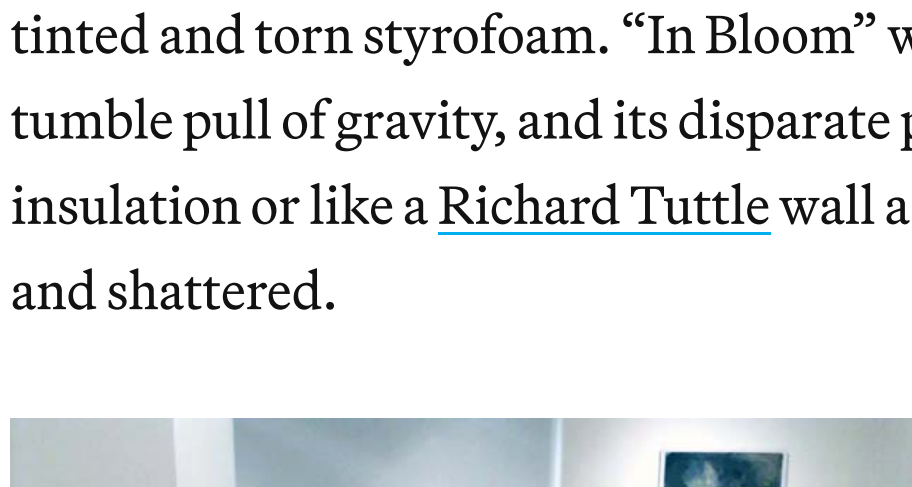


Maria Walker, "Maine Star (Yellow, Purple, Red, Green)" (2013), Fresco on burlap mounted on wood, 12 x 12 inches (courtesy Walter O'Neill)

Walker's contemplative paintings titled *Maine Stars* have a diamond orientation with the plaster scored and pressed in places and the grain and presence of the underlying wood accentuated. They have an intimate restraint that considers every physical part of the meditative whole and are comprised of subdued, nocturnal colors. As you walk through the exhibition, there are cracks and crumbles underfoot where bits of plaster have chipped and Nadia Ayari's "Bach" may be the most

delicate piece of all. Using thickly painted short, stippled strokes she pins fresco on burlap directly to the wall creating a work that is laden with symbols and allegorically rich.

Sean Glover and Gabriel Pionkowski's works have a fresh, pop sensibility that thrusts combinations of fresco painting and found objects into the gallery space, casually tucked here and there about the room. Pionkowski inlays plaster into the upper portions of three old-fashioned washboards and colors these sections in primary red, blue, and yellow. By turning them this way and that, he creates a Mondrian-esque assemblage. The washboards come equipped with a built-in geometric simplicity while rippled aluminum and glass sections add rhythm and texture.



Gabriel Pionkowski, "Untitled" (2012), Washboards with inlaid fresco, largest 18" x 24".

Glover's "In Bloom" (2014) featured a helium balloon wrapped in a geodesic dome of wooden dowels, the balloon held in place by a white ribbon tethered to a collection of fresco shards. At the start of the exhibition the balloon had floated in the air, but a few weeks later had lost its buoyancy and drooped to the ground, the dome catching and holding it in place. The dowels created a makeshift podium

settling nicely on the hardwood floor. The fresco shards are the result of affixing plaster to styrofoam with (what looks like) a grey cement, and they have a beautifully raw and exposed materiality; glowing paint, foil, crumbled plaster, tinted and torn styrofoam. "In Bloom" was conceived around the rough and tumble pull of gravity, and its disparate pieces resemble scattered sheet rock and insulation or like a Richard Tuttle wall assemblage that had fallen to the floor and shattered.



Sean Glover, "In Bloom" (2014), Fresco on styrofoam with helium balloon, dimensions variable.

Glover's other series, titled *Disembodies*, is more self contained. He layers styrofoam sheets on top of one another then carves the outer shape into a faceted rock-like formation, digging a hole through the center where he applies the fresco in brilliant color. The outer sheets are layered in beautifully modulated colors like stratified minerals that have been cracked open to reveal a rich, opulent inner core.

Walter O'Neill curates *Off the Wall* and both he and Bozhkov have had long-term stints as fresco instructors at Skowhegan School of Art. Looking over the careers of the artists in the

show it is apparent that fresco painting is just one aspect of their multi-faceted practices, that in addition to acrylic and oil painting include sculpture, video, writing, performance, and graphic design. Most artists don many hats nowadays working across mediums and vocations and it is quite possible that the artists included here have studied under O'Neill or Bozhkov or collaborated with one another in some capacity. Whatever the case, the ancient medium of fresco with its rich history and transformative properties is alive and well in the hands of these artists.

Off the Wall: Fresco Painting continues at Hudson Guild Gallery (441 West 26 Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 29.

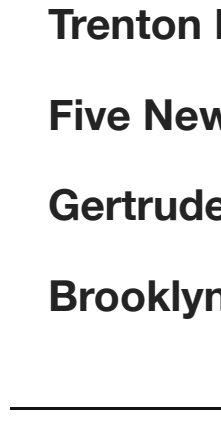
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Patrick Neal is a painter, freelance art writer and longtime resident of Long Island City. www.patrickneal-art.com. **More by Patrick Neal**

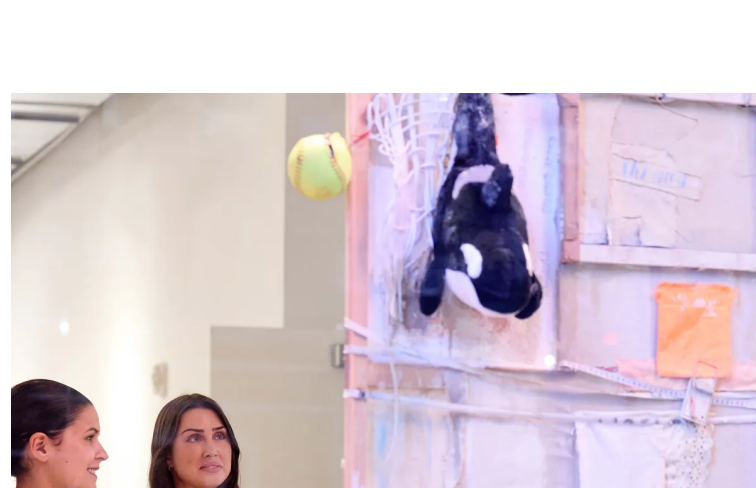
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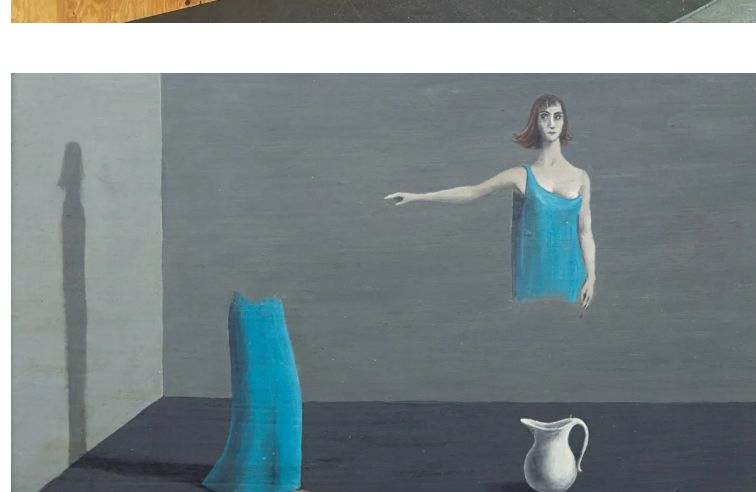
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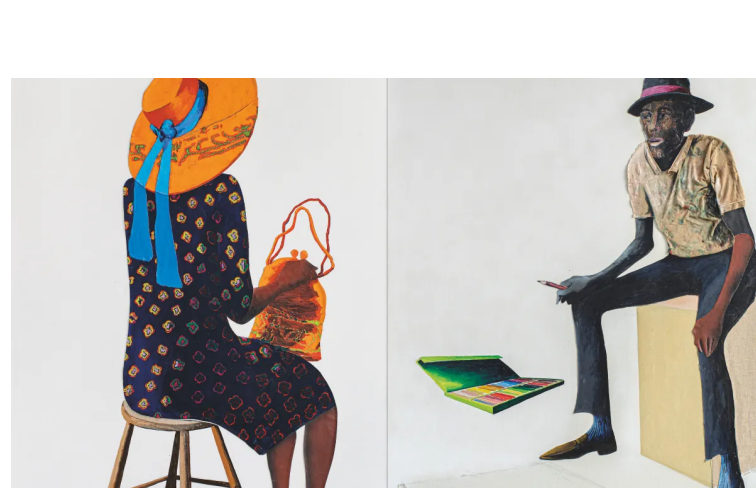
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The museum's unions are protesting the sweeping staff cuts that impacted 47 employees after the institution announced a \$10M budget deficit.
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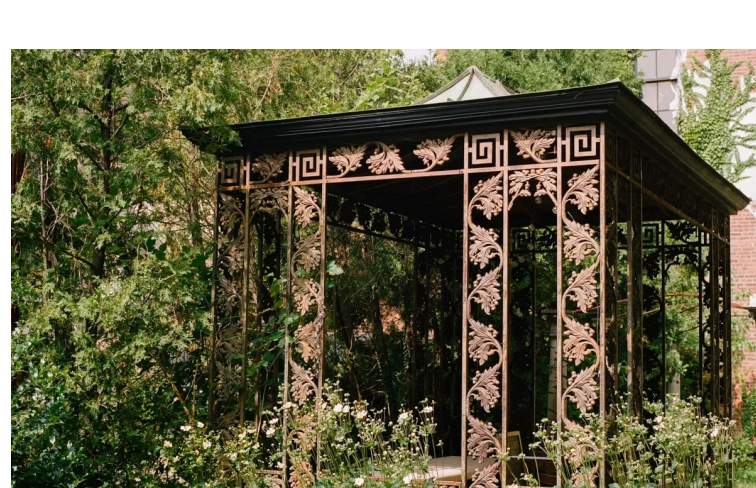
Trenton Doyle Hancock Confronts Philip Guston's Legacy
The artist sits down with *Hyperallergic* Editor-in-Chief Hrag Vartanian and critic John Yau to discuss his work, which brings together Guston's notorious KKK figures with his own host of comic characters to confront white supremacy.
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The MFA Art Practice program at SVA redefines artmaking through a collaborative, cross-disciplinary approach that welcomes non-traditional applicants.



Notes From a Post-DEI Art World
Even if DEI dies, arts organizations should still move toward the accessibility that has always been at the core of the effort. Here's how.
Lise Flagler



Gertrude Abercrombie's American Surrealism
Feted as the "Queen of the Bohemians," Abercrombie saw herself as a kind of jazz witch forging dream visions into a strange, eerie, and occult body of work.
Ed Simon



Benny Andrews Painted the Textures of Life
Collaged scraps of cloth or crumpled paper in Andrews's portraits were a subversive and insistent means of encompassing his own non-White, non-urban roots.
Debra Brehmer



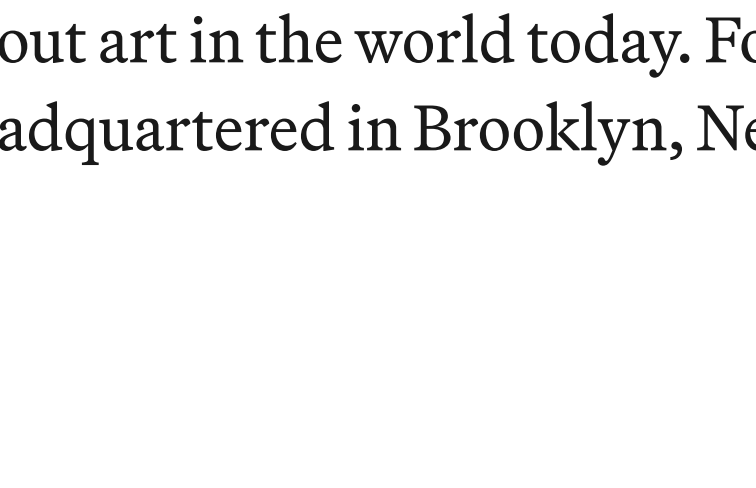
Elizabeth Street Garden Sues NYC Amid Eviction Battle
A new lawsuit argues that the Manhattan sculpture garden is a unique artwork protected by the Visual Artists Rights Act.
Isa Farfan



Announcement
The Bell Reimagines Julien Creuzet's French Pavilion From the Venice Biennale
The artist's debut solo exhibition in the United States, "Attila cataract (...)," marks the first time the French Pavilion has traveled to the country. On view at Brown University.



Wayne Thiebaud Retrospective Coming to San Francisco
An exhibition at the Legion of Honor is billed as the first to explore the artist's "reinterpretations" of works by his artistic influences.
Rhea Nayyar



An Artist's Dispatches From Luigi Mangione's Hearing
I showed up at the Manhattan courthouse with my watercolor pencils and paper in hand only to find that everyone wanted "the shot," and that this work is not for the faint of heart.
Danielle De Jesus