

HYPERALLERGIC

Scar Tissue John Yau | November 13, 2016



Brenda Goodman, "Ishy" (2016), oil on wood, 52 x 60 inches (all images courtesy Jeff Bailey Gallery)

HUDSON, New York — Brenda Goodman's work has long been about the head and body, the relationship between the haunted inner self and the disquieting outer, physical form. Although Goodman's work has undergone a number of radical changes over the course of her six-decade career, the frayed bond between head (thinking and remembering) and body (feeling) has remained one of her mainstays. The other constant is that she has never fit into the scene — which is primarily about the celebration of certain styles and subjects, with anguish and the damaged psyche assigned to one of lowest rungs on the ladder.

I get the feeling that the art establishment would prefer that the damaged psyche be dealt with by poets in books it can keep on shelves, unread. It is the one mirror that many of us don't want to look into. Although Goodman can't seem to get away from that looking glass, her work never becomes maudlin, never asks for sympathy, and never singles her out. This isn't her story but ours, those of us who recognize that we could not have gotten this far unscathed.



Brenda Goodman, "What'd You Say?" (2016), oil on paper, 6 x 8 inches

In her current exhibition, *Brenda Goodman*, at Jeff Bailey in Hudson, New York (October 29 – December 18, 2016), you don't need to be a jet propulsion expert to realize that she packs more power into a small painting than many of her contemporaries who need a corporate lobby or museum wall. To one side of this cozy gallery, there is a row of works (all oil on paper) that measure six by eight inches, and each is a gem that bears repeated scrutiny. Dominated by red and black, with yellow and orange making repeat appearances, Goodman's palette is one in which blue (signifying sky or transcendence) seldom appears, and green, when she uses it, evokes bodily foulness rather than verdant grass. It is a palette tied to the damaged earth and the cave (or inner darkness). The variegated surface ranges from smooth and scraped to ridges of paint and cracked, built-up surfaces.

In the oil on paper, "Don't Know Why But I Do" (2016), the dominant form hovers between a boldly outlined configuration you might see in a late 1930s Cubist still life by Lee Krasner and a hybrid geometric figure projecting a mammoth, black leg and talons to the far right edge of the sheet. Below this form, and extending out of it as if crushed beneath its weight, the silhouette of a tiny leg and foot rests along the bottom of the picture. The shift in scale opens the work up, as well as raises the question: what is the relationship between the two? And what about the black form with the elongated, bilious green head floating above the leg and foot?



Brenda Goodman, “Sad Guy” (2016), oil on paper, 6 x 8 inches

Also six by eight inches, “Sad Guy” (2016) is dominated by a large black misshapen square. With its eye closer to the upper left-hand corner as it looks from right to left, I was reminded of a whale. A black triangle filled with bright, raised circles of paint is affixed to the upper right side of the black square like a cap, which completes the shape’s quasi-square form. A pinkish-gray trunk hangs from the cap on the upper right, while a green, truncated triangle with three long whiskers or feelers extends into the picture from the left edge. What is the nature of this encounter? While viewers might empathize with this creature, Goodman never offers a reason why it might be sad.

Goodman, like Joyce Pensato, depicts figures with exaggerated features— outsized ears, or malformed heads, or eyes that are too large or too small. They are artists who care about the injured and bedraggled, outsiders who exist on the opposite end of the spectrum from the “beautiful people” or the predatory class, which lacks imagination. The difference is that Goodman invents her creatures, while Pensato uses well-known figures, from toys to cartoons to popular television shows. Neither approach is better than the other.

In two related works on paper, “What’d You Say?” and “What’d You Say? (2)” (both 2016), a head is dominant, with one ear larger than the other. The inability to hear what someone else is saying — an ailment that afflicts many people as they get older — underscores the isolation that is far more commonplace and deeply embedded in this society than we want or care to admit.



Brenda Goodman, “Complicated Happiness” (2016), oil on wood, 50 x 36 inches

The two largest paintings in the exhibition, “Ishy” and “Complicated Happiness” (both 2016) represent two different poles in Goodman’s work. In “Ishy,” a white, featureless creature lies along the painting’s bottom edge, its animal-like head pointed up, its short legs rising at a diagonal away from the body. This pale creature — almost Snoopy-like on its back — compels us to place the multicolored forms floating above it in some kind of context, but it’s a task that constantly eludes us.

One of the things that I admire about Goodman is her willingness to push a painting into a territory all its own. She isn’t interested in stylistic consistency or any of the other common denominators that can be used to brand one’s work. “Complicated Happiness” (2016) is a good example of what I am talking about. It is as odd and commanding as previous paintings I’ve written about: “Jumping Out of My Skin” (2014) and “Almost a Bride” (2015). While the earlier two are figurative, “Complicated Happiness” comes off as abstract. And yet, the longer I looked at it, the more I was convinced there was at least one figure in it. It is composed of an open form in which one leg (or side) stretches along the bottom of the painting, while the other leg (or torso) extends almost halfway up the left edge.

This figural form – made of scraped and scribbled white paint on a dark ground — is topped by a slightly bulging rectangle made of a patchwork of different colors (orange, yellow, green,

blue, red, pink, brown, and violet). To the right of this abstract figural form we see a red kite/blade, a black biomorphic shape, and a thick, looping line that goes from black to pink to salmon. These and other shapes are compressed into a layered, claustrophobic space.



Brenda Goodman, "I Don't Know Why But I Do" (2016), oil on paper, 6 x 8 inches

One of the interesting things about this form, which seems to be seated in the painting's lower left corner, is that it is both abstract and figurative, with neither dominating the other. When I read it figuratively, I have to consider the other shapes in light of that view. Is the black, biomorphic form a body? What about the eye-like dot in the small black shape in the lower right corner? Or the red kite (or is it a blade?) that plunges downward from the top edge? Or the looping network that changes from pink to salmon to black? One of the beauties of Goodman's painting is its refusal to settle for the immediately legible. By making work that can be read as either abstract or figurative, she invites viewers to become self-reflective and consider the dynamics of relationships. Goodman's work gains further urgency at this time, where the concept of clarity is confused with whatever is quickly and comfortably identifiable.

Brenda Goodman *continues at Jeff Bailey Gallery (127 Warren Street, Hudson, New York) through December 18.*