

# HYPERALLERGIC

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## Brenda Goodman Cuts Deep

Goodman's recent work is distressing, captivating, and weirdly funny.

John Yau

Brenda Goodman is never charming, even at her most abstract. In her series “Self-Portraits,” which preoccupied her from 1994 to 2011, she depicted herself as an overweight, naked woman standing in a cavernous studio surrounded by her paintings. In close-up views, she confronted viewers with a ravenous creature cramming her mouth with stuff, a seamless merging of scarred paint and monstrous imagery. She is one of the few artists who can pull off being this visceral without sliding into bombast or mawkishness.

Let's get the record straight for once. Next to her work, Julian Schnabel's looks exactly like what it is: buffoonish bluster. I mean Goodman is a painter, while Schnabel is a slatherer. His broken plates are stand-ins for feelings: a smart if by now tiresome way to sell his awkward paint handling and inflated ego. It is why he has painted on velvet and other unreceptive surfaces. It makes him look daring and “avant-garde.” The awkwardness in Goodman's work is not because she can't do something, but because it is necessary. She does not need to make a gigantic painting on rawhide — she can do it on paper the size of a postcard and still grab you by eyeballs and shake you.



Brenda Goodman, “What’d You Say (4)” (2016), oil on wood, 72 x 80 inches (all images courtesy DAVID&SCHWEITZER Contemporary)

I wonder if the reason that Schnabel is world-famous and Goodman has long been an artist’s artist has to do with their gender and subject matter. It is one thing to paint a nude woman sexily, or even neutrally, and another thing to paint her overweight and vulnerable. Goodman has always crossed the line into the realm of wretchedness, where her neighbors are Goya, Alfred Kubin, Jean Dubuffet, and James Ensor. This is why I find her recent work so distressing and, more importantly, captivating, and — in at least a two instances — weirdly funny.



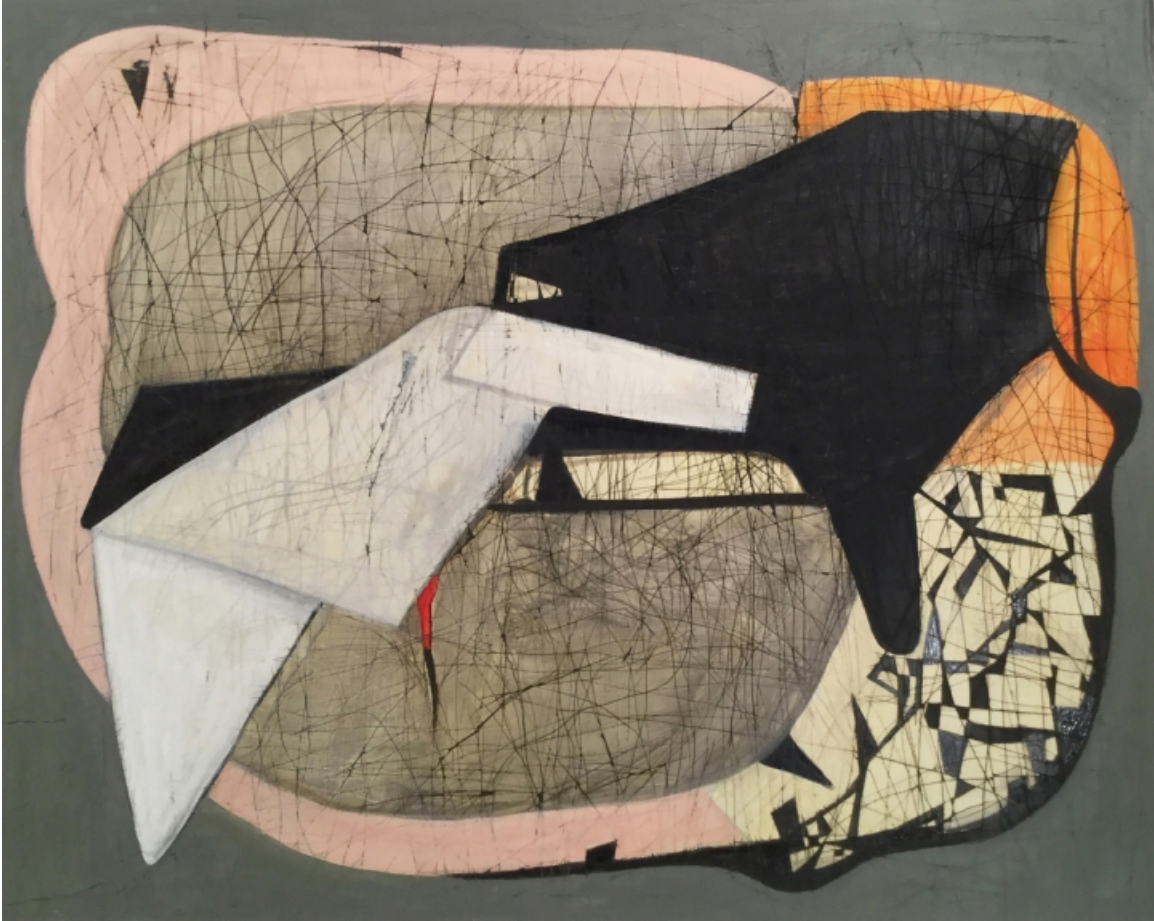
Brenda Goodman, "Something to Say" (2017), oil on wood, 32 x 32 inches

Given Goodman's repeated returns to sites of trauma, one might reasonably expect her to have settled into a signature style or methodology by now, but that has never been her way. She keeps doing something unexpected. In her exhibition *Brenda Goodman: In a New Space* at DAVID&SCHWEITZER Contemporary (September 8 – October 1, 2017), she uses a linoleum cutter on wooden hollow core doors or, in the case of paper, an ice pick, to incise the surface, or, more accurately, to scar the work's skin. (I learned what instruments she used from the catalogue essay, which was written by my Hyperallergic Weekend colleague, Thomas Micchelli). The cuts form a tangle of lines, which become the starting point for Goodman to find her forms. It is hard not to read these forms as heads or bodies, and the lines as scars, and yet they resist that closure;

they don't become namable. This is because the lines and forms bond, turning the paintings and works on paper into scarred things. The cuts are incorporated into the shapes, even when myriad lines cross over the entire surface, like the tracks of an OCD ice skater on crystal meth. You can see where Goodman has selected sections of the line as a border to help contain and define the image, allowing a head-like form to arise out of a snarled web, but that does not deny the feeling of madness lurking in the lines.

Goodman renders the border between abstraction and representation meaningless. The internal sectioning of her forms invites us to categorize what we are looking at, even as they resist succumbing to that dominance. In the nearly square painting "Something to Say" (2017), the form is clearly a head in profile, facing from left to right, and it is also equally apparent that this is not what it is at all. You can read one area as hairdo and a curving black line as the jaw, but then such one-to-one matching goes haywire, and you go off the rails. This is what art can do — confront you with a mystery that speaks to the dark parts of your psyche, pull away your pretenses, and expose you to all that you try to cover over.

What does the section that is filled with black and cream-colored geometric shapes, all further marked by the gouged lines, relate to? What about the interplay between flat and volumetric shapes, as she does in "Watching and Waiting" (2017)? What determines whether she obscures some of the cut lines with paint, while leaving others visible, or fills in some of the lines with black paint? There is nothing programmatic about Goodman's approach. Once she cuts the lines, she begins considering how to bring them into the composition. They are not just part of a plane on which the artist deposits paint. They give her something to react against as well as work with.



Brenda Goodman, “Watching and Waiting” (2017), oil on wood, 32 x 40 inches

Although you cannot name the forms, nearly all of them evoke the body, with the scarred surface further inflecting that reading. We don't just see these shapes: we experience their scarred skin and their entrapment in a frenetic web. Goodman conjures up scarred, ectoplasmic beings without becoming theatrical. None of what she does, no matter how over-the-top the gesture, including cutting the surface of her panels with a sharp blade, seems like a device or tic. She keeps expanding her possibilities. This becomes apparent when considering the differences between the two paintings dated 2016 and the ones dated 2017.

In “What'd You Say? (4)” (2016), an elongated head-like form — the top left of the forehead is partially covered by a grid of white lines squeezed out of a bottle — with two protruding ears. The larger left ear is a darker red with black mixed in — the shape reminds me of a chicken leg. A tiny white hand curls around the ear, as if clutching it, or pushing it against the head. The image is odd, funny, and distressing. In “Holding a

Dream,” the other painting dated 2016, the abstract figure is made of two distinct parts — an oval head and slightly darker leg and foot, both a grayish, dirty white, which are bisected by an orange torso with two arms and one leg and foot. The figure seems to be holding up (or onto) a sectioned, multi-colored, abstract form (somewhere between a thought balloon and a misshapen head). A black grid that is more like a netting of visceral strings of paint takes up much of the rest of the painting. The divided body, its pose, is comical and grim.



Brenda Goodman, “Holding a Dream” (2016), oil on wood, 59 x 45 inches

If we look at the works chronologically, it appears as if Goodman decided that she had gone as far as she could in this direction, and forced herself to change by incising the surfaces that she worked on. Previously, she used to draw squiggling lines of paint to create an active ground, which helped her find a form. Her shapes owe something to Brancusi and cartoons, which is to say they always feel perfect and malformed, graceful and awkward. She paints some of the shapes flatly while shading others. The surfaces are like scar tissue, and the incisions add to this reading. The colors are gloomy — sooty blacks and dirty whites, dusty pinks and bilious greens and yellows. There are a number of artists working the border between abstraction and figuration, with the female body as the ostensible subject. None of them get as much inchoate feeling into their work as Goodman. She is a one-of-a-kind artist and we ought to wake up to that fact.

*Brenda Goodman: In a New Space continues at DAVID&SCHWEITZER Contemporary (56 Bogart Street, Bushwick, Brooklyn) through October 1.*