

LAUREN CLAY PICKS UP THE BATON AND MAKES A STATEMENT

In *Windows and Walls* at Asya Geisberg Gallery, Lauren Clay's biomorphic paintings, and immersive, hand-marbled wallpaper installation, creates a visually vibrant and transient experience that is the hallmark of this show. It reveals Clay as an artist who is uniquely comfortable at handling a plethora of ideas and a deft to carry them out at will. *Windows and Walls* is also a reflection of how a new generation of artists continue to insert themselves, and the myriad of content that was once denied cultural value, within an ever-expanding language of visual culture.

First, let's celebrate some recent history. As Hilma af Klint's survey at the Guggenheim reveals, the origins of Western abstraction does not start with Malevich and the *Black Square*, 1915, it starts with the mystical presence and grandeur of Hilma almost a full decade before. The idea of the canon now tossed and a vision of our cultural history being more expansive and inclusive, continually inserting what was once derided and on the margins, is a watershed moment.

Windows and Walls also reminded me of Katy Siegel and David Reed's seminal show *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967-1975*, at the National Academy in 2007. During a time when painting was considered dead by Donald Judd and the late Robert Morris, painting in New York was actually experiencing an uncanny resurgence. With an abandonment of modernist ideals, and no longer restricted to the idea of medium-specificity, artists began to allow performance,

video and three-dimensional work to inform their practice. Among the many standouts, Lynda Benglis' poured latex 'floor paintings'; Joe Overstreet's seductively suspended works using grommets and rope; and the unrivaled Elizabeth Murray, whose wild, cartoon-based canvases reshaped modernist abstraction.

This history is important in understanding our current moment and where we find Clay picking up the baton from Elizabeth Murray and a generation of pioneers. In *Double ascending stair*, 2018, and many of the works on view, the power of Clay's work is in the ability to deny the viewer a singular meaning, in favor of channeling disparate and varying reads. I was reminded of the use of mudras, a series of symbolic hand gestures used in religious ceremonies and dances of India, and in yoga; Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* series (begun in 1973), which "used a typology of abstracted feminine forms, through which she hoped to access an omnipresent female force;" and the expanded possibility of dance, music and visual culture found in the unwavering movement in Merce Cunningham's work.

How does all of this come up to the surface? The color, weight and movement of Clay's paintings have such a wonderful physicality, it is hard not to see them as stand-ins for the body. There is an economy of color that allows us to trace these objects like we would the body of a dancer creating bursts of radiant light and form along the way. In *Double wavy window*, 2018, the feminine power of nature's flora is undeniable. The seductive curves of this elegant form are heightened by a diamond-shaped opening where two grey-colored tresses buoyantly flow from the work's center. The image is striking in its simplicity; the

gradation of greens, blues, reds and yellow hues, soothing with an unexpected sense of life, energy and possibility.

Scaled to the body and installed low near the gallery floor, Clay's work has a way of reinforcing a connection with nature and the specificity of site, making for a palpable confrontation for those that are ready to meet it. Add to this the artist's intimate hand-marbleized collage work, here blown-up and digitally printed to cover the scale of the gallery's front room, and we begin to see the makings of Clay's innovative push forward. A second look at *Double wavy window*, set amid a trompe l'oeil image of Neoclassical archways and small apertures, reveals a space where the work appears to suspend within a silky immateriality. The transformative power of the female body as a catalyst of ensuing flux, a sort of shape shifter through our collective history, feels poignantly celebrated here.

In many ways, this may be Elizabeth Murray's greatest gift to us. As John Yau recently wrote, "What struck me while looking at *Elizabeth Murray: Painting in the '80s* at Pace Gallery (November 2, 2017 - January 13, 2018) was not that she didn't fit, but that she didn't fit with such confidence." Clay carries this relentless spirit and radicality into the early days of this new century with a palpable connection to those that came before her; and a reminder that the body is physical, malleable, and ultimately insatiable, in its desire to create meaning. This is the moment in *Windows and Walls*, where history and the body become immaterial; where the work's criticality rejoices in being in flux, and Clay's ability to explore her relationship to this cherished history fills the air with promise and sensuality.

- Steve Rivera, *The Great Fires*