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'Le Tableau: French Abstraction and Its Affinities'

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Cheim & Read

In the mid-1960s, when it was widely assumed in this town that the fate of abstract painting lay pretty much in the hands of artists who resided between the East River and the Hudson, it is said that Frank Stella taught his very young daughter to say the phrase "French painting is bad painting." True or not, this program of indoctrination illustrates the sense of America's dominance of painting at that moment.

Joe Fyfe, a New York painter and critic who briefly lived in Paris, organized "Le Tableau" as "a pointed counterbalance to the rejection of French painting by the American artistic and critical establishment." I'm not sure how much counterbalancing can be achieved with a group of 25 canvases, of which 17 date from the last decade, given the complexity of the argument. The men and women who made them divide fairly evenly between Americans (including some expatriates in France) and Europeans (mostly French). The works spread over nearly a century of art history, from Jean Fautrier (1898-1964) to Bianca Beck, who was born in 1979.

But the show reminds us that quality is as much a matter of authenticity as invention. What counts is the impact of the individual work on the individual viewer, and the way painting echoes through painting.

There's plenty impact and echoing here. A tiny clogged canvas by Jean-Paul Riopelle from 1967 could easily have been painted by Louise Fishman, whose more expansive work hangs opposite.

Between them a large fluttery work by Daniel Hesidence contradicts the compression of its opposite number: Fautrier's small slab of white paint tinted pale red on green. The sparse, tilelike geometry of a 2009 work by Bernard Piffaretti parses the voluptuous blues and greens of a 1977 canvas by Joan Mitchell.

Adjacent paintings by Richard Aldrich and Juan Uslé sparkle on the subject of bare canvas, hard edges and green. Works by Merlin James, John Zurier, Katy Moran, Sarah Rapson and Jean François Maurige are among several others that reward close attention.

As for some of the rest, Rachel Stella was not always wrong.

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