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What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

Flora Crockett: Works from the 1940s and 1950s



The history of art is full of surprises. The latest is “Flora Crockett: Works From the 1940s and 1950s” at Meredith Ward Fine Art on the Upper East Side. In 2015 I reviewed this forgotten painter’s first solo show in New York since 1946 (also at Meredith Ward), and wondered how many more female artists awaited rediscovery. I should have wondered what further revelations Ms. Crockett’s work held.

One is certainly Meredith Ward’s second Crockett exhibition; it is even better than the first, which focused on works from the 60’s and 70’s. As seen here, Ms. Crockett’s earlier works are even more confident and witty than what she produced later. They pull together several strands — Surrealism,

biomorphism, a prescient Pop Art buoyancy — in ways that almost always seem just right, supported by an unerring color sense and broad knowledge of the various ways oil paint can be applied to canvas. This all seems remarkably up-to-date: Several paintings could easily be from our new century.

Smoke and clouds are a thing. In one painting, smoke rings of white and celadon float above a dark-purple femurlike form against a beautiful red-on-cream crosshatch pattern startlingly similar to that which Jasper Johns employed in the 1970s. In another, a current of smoke wafts across the painting like a lazy jet stream, through a levitating circle seemingly made of shiny red ribbon, while the background pattern is green-on-green, a camouflagelike brocade. Sometimes Ms. Crockett, who died in 1979, seems to respond to her contemporaries. There are signs of Hans Hofmann’s push-pull forms and rectilinear compositions reminiscent of Myron Stout and Burgoyne Diller. But these allusions don’t detract; in fact, they indicate a compelling, unthreatened awareness. This show is a must-see, not least for budding art historians seeking a thesis subject. — ROBERTA SMITH