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ealing: Paris, February 25, 1830—
Eight hours to curtain. Alexandre Dumas, Hector Berlioz, and other Romantics have gathered at the Théâtre Français. Théophile Gautier, with leonine mane, rolls up wearing a red waistcoat and lime green pants. Out of nowhere, a cabbage strikes Balzac. Is it a dealbreaker? Not for the Romantics. Not for the premiere of Victor Hugo’s latest triumph. Yes, Hugo. Hugo is here himself, the Romantic playwright at the ripe old age of twenty-eight, rallying his friends for the performance. The word of the hour is “hierro”—Spanish for iron. Food and drink are soon consumed—plenty of it, even for France. Bottles roll down the aisles. The theater fills with the smell of sausage. It’s Liberals versus Royalists. Romantics versus Classical. Young versus old. Box seats versus the floor. Soon, in come the rest of the audience, the establishment, and the atmosphere hits fever pitch. But in a moment the Romantics will have won the day. The production will play through forty-five performances. A theatrical scandal will have rocked Paris. And the name of the play? Of course: Hernani.

Haven’t heard of Hernani? For what became France’s most important theatrical event of the nineteenth century, the play itself is little performed today, outside of Verdi’s operatic adaptation. In his Landmarks in French Literature, Lytton Strachey wrote, “On the whole, the dramatic achievement of the Romantic School was the least valuable part of their work. Hernani, the first performance of which marked the turning-point of the movement, is a piece of bombastic melodrama, full of the stagiest clap-trap and the most turgid declamation. ... Of true character and true passion it has no trace.” Hernani, written in less than a month by Hugo, had little to do with the bandit Hernani and everything to do with orchestrating the passions of an audience.

Last month this column reported on the frenzy of the New York art fairs—in particular of “The Armory Show,” the contemporary art fair at the piers. Nostalgie de la boue? La Vie de Bohème? You
name it: Art has been doing the same thing for a long while. It’s *Hernani* again and again and again. For those of us interested in, let’s say, serious painting, more than a few New York galleries are always ready to provide. The editors at *The New Yorker* may choose to stay downtown in the Chelsea hothouses, but all the better for painting. The worst headline a serious painter can face these days is the one that reads “Painting is Back.” *Paint* may be back. But *painting*? Doubt it.

Painting needs Armory just as Armory needs painting, and mutual recriminations simply add to the *Hernani* scandal. But there is a twist to the old model. Shock has become Classical—and painters have become the cultural Romantics working against salon aesthetes. *Hernani* may have been filmed before a live studio audience, but in its umpteenth run in syndication the *claque* track is canned.

This all goes to say that there is some truly shocking painting on display in New York this month—beautiful, confident, rooted in the tradition that goes back way before *Hernani*, yet new and open to anyone who gets it.

In reproduction, the vertically striped abstractions of Adrienne Farb might appear to be an update of the Color Field painters, of Morris Louis with proper primer. That they are, but Farb’s roots go deeper. Her persistent output—turning incrementally in each canvas, adapting over a period of years—has yielded a distillation of painting’s past, a chemical refinement of the basic elements Ma, deK, Ho, Nol, Ol, No, Bo, and deS,—otherwise known as Matisse, de Kooning, Hofmann, Noland, Olitski, Nolde, Bonnard, and de Staël. “History painting,” with a modernist edge: Farb’s approach itself isn’t new, but she proceeds in a convincing way that’s a joy to behold, an account of her development collected into frame by frame vignettes. Series titles like *Those Cool September Mornings, Always and Forever*, and *Bouleversement* become the autobiographical chapters heads of this story.

A student in art history with Professor Kermit Champa (whose death we noted in these pages last September), Farb graduated from Brown and went to paint in Paris and study the art of that city, where she lived and exhibited for over a decade. This was followed by years in London and finally New York, her palette changing with each new location—she established a studio in Williamsburg only recently. With a few months’ turnaround, Mary Ryan Gallery has now enlisted Farb for her first show in that space.[1]

In 2004 Champa noted of Farb: “Almost perversely the paintings insist on operating in an expressively emphatic world of their own—a world which, while in some respects unique, even idiosyncratic, nonetheless remains anchored to canonically high modernism. The shadows of historical work as disparate as Matisse and Leger, Louis and Rothko abound but as an exciting collective lineage, never as a feudal obligation.”

In her latest work, the question of Farb’s aesthetic inheritance comes to a head. Her development has progressed past the point of historical recognition. Farb paints right to left across the picture plane in
an intuitive way of her own design, compacting and expanding lines, contrasting colors one off the
other. Her technique in a single washy stroke or hairline stripe can display a spare virtuosity that you
won’t find in two piers at Armory.

With each new canvas and new line of paint, Farb encounters Farb. For someone unfamiliar with past
work, the effect can be unsatisfying. Not to say the paintings don’t hold up on their own. They do.
My one complaint is that Mary Ryan could have displayed the work of five or ten years ago and not
just recent examples, thus revealing Farb’s progressional route. Bars of color untangle themselves and
come into crisper focus over time. Her work is anything but static.

During a studio visit, it came up in conversation that Farb has no binocular vision. How appropriate,
I thought, for such an artist to perceive the recesses of art history in only two dimensions.

To followers of serious painting, Graham Nickson needs little introduction. In addition to serving
as Dean of the New York Studio School since 1988, his paintings are frequently exhibited at
Salander-O’Reilly Galleries and elsewhere. What a knockout they are, always—the latest show no
exception.[2] By setting off colors in his particular way, Nickson generates luminosities that one can
only describe as preternatural. Colors read differently from what they really are: purples becomes
reds. Even blacks, as he uses black for the minatory clouds of Edge Bathers (1983–2005), take on
colorist qualities. Yet it is Cézanne, more than Matisse, who informs Nickson’s modeling of volume.
In Uluru: Shaman (2001–2005), a sculptural nude shares the same structural underpinnings as the
mountain behind her. Australia informs his color choices and becomes the Aix where Nickson studies
the sea and atmosphere. Although set in Australia, in a way his nudes are always in Aix. They are Aix.

Not every painter I know responds well to Nickson’s work. Maybe he’s too cerebral. One can just
about feel the weight of modernism resting on the shoulders of every Nickson canvas. His bathers
have been hammered out and beaten into shape in countless studies. His compositions are set pieces
arranged with benign neglect for the interaction of characters. Sandbar Bathers (2001–2005), a stunning
work, has all the pastiche-like characteristics of Grande Jatte. In the vertical panels of Edge Bathers and
in other works I am reminded of Denis’s Story of Psyche in the Hermitage, gaudy decorator art to
some, but I think wonderfully rich. Surrounded by the decibel levels of our visual world, Nickson’s
amped-up paintings, tweaked to overperfection in the studio, look right to me. Nickson is a tough,
ambitious painter at the top of his form.

If painting goes pop in the hands of Wayne Thiebaud, as I remarked of his last show at Allan
Stone, pop also goes painting.[3] Thiebaud pops it both ways. He can make poppin’ fresh good
work by incorporating extra-painting ingredients into his compositions—something I missed in the
last review. His best pieces mix in the five-and-dime landscapes of Pop and even the exigencies of
Minimalism, all baked in the painter’s oven. Fudge and Divinity (1962), a Morandi-like still life of
creamy surfaces, glistens in Flavin-like colors. Our interest in a painting such as Untitled (Bolt Cutter)
(1972) has less to do with hardware and more with its technicolor chiaroscuro—a Thiebaud specialty. *Tie Rack* (1969), the display piece of this technique, resonates not only with colorful cravats but with a whole spectrum of shadows and refractions.

I am still not convinced that Thiebaud’s recent aerial landscapes like *River Cloud* (2002) work as well as these still lives. I think his paintings work best when grounded in the concrete of the everyday, and when his surfaces interact most directly with their contents. The drips on the paint can of *Untitled* (1985), for example, are real drips. Thiebaud is far too good to be fly-over country. The road trip is the only way to go.

Stop the presses! Hold that headline! Run a retraction! All of two pages ago I doubted whether painting would ever be “back.” But yes, Virginia. Painting is Back. At the Sideshow Gallery in Williamsburg, “Thornton Willis and James Little: Raising the Bar” has become the sleeper hit of the season, with a run extended now into May. I caught these two painterly statesmen just hours before deadline. With richly brushed surfaces of oils and wax, James Little proves that not all hard edge is created equal: the vibrating colors and racing lines of *Exit Strategy* (2004) dazzle the eye. Thornton Willis, meanwhile, has worked through Minimalism and Cubism since the 1970s to arrive at a totemic synthetic of modern painting. *Dog Fight* (2002), my favorite piece of the show, even evinces Beckmann.

Willis builds up heaping layers of Cubist castoffs, drafting marks, and colored planes. Little lures us in with sensuous surfaces of silk and quicksand, and colors as sharp as needles. The two play perfectly together—a double-stroke engine in paint and a humming dynamo of potential.

All this? In Williamsburg? Victor Hugo would be shocked indeed.

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