

ART & DESIGN

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By ROBERTA SMITH, MARTHA SCHWENDENER and WILL HEINRICH NOV. 14, 2017

Marcia Marcus

Through Dec. 2. Eric Firestone Gallery, 4 Great Jones Street, No. 4, Manhattan; 917-324-3386, ericfirestonegallery.com.

Art history is in constant flux, as you can see by the recent rise of artists who were left out of earlier narratives. This year, the exhibition “Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952-1965,” at the Grey Art Gallery, featured many overlooked artists whose contributions to mid-20th-century art are noteworthy. One of them is the painter Marcia Marcus, whose work is currently on view in “Role Play: Paintings 1958-1973” at Eric Firestone Gallery.

In the 1950s, Ms. Marcus studied with Edwin Dickinson at the Art Students League and alongside the painter Alex Katz at Cooper Union. (Now 89, she is no longer a practicing artist.) Ms. Marcus painted the human form in flat color with a muted affect. Sparse in detail and expression, the paintings feel perfect for an era in which Pop Art and Minimalism reigned. But they also recall the stiff, official poses of everything from Egyptian friezes and Minoan frescoes to early Renaissance portraiture. Many of the subjects were art world figures: the critic Jill Johnston; the curator and art historian Henri Zerner; the artists Bob Thompson, Lucas Samaras, Red Grooms, Emily Mason and Hazel Belvo. But Ms. Marcus also painted her friends and neighbors from the Lower East Side and Provincetown, Mass.

Textile patterns and gold leaf are incorporated into the compositions, and oval and diamond-shaped canvases occasionally frame her figures. You can detect

similarities not only with the portraiture of Mr. Katz, but also with that of Barkley L. Hendricks, Sylvia Sleigh and particularly Alice Neel in one respect: Like Ms. Neel, Ms. Marcus painted a range of ethnicities, reminding us that the art world, in its best moments, was not ruled by the same sexist white supremacy that has often plagued art history.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER