

ARTS+

## In a Season of Abstract Painting at New York Galleries, These Two Artists Stand Out

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Josette Urso, 'Corduroy and the Fern' (2024). Via Markel Fine Arts



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*'Josette Urso: Wildcard'*  
Kathryn Markel Fine Art  
Until July 26

*'Jill Nathanson: Chord Field'*  
Berry Campbell Gallery  
Until August 16

The summer of 2024 has turned out to be a season of abstract painting at New York City galleries — and good abstract painting to boot.

Prior obligations kept me from writing about Kim Uchiyama’s regal variations on architecture and antiquity at Helm Contemporary, a show that closed its doors at the end of June. An exhibition of Hester Simpson’s eye-popping distillations of natural forms, seen at Ricco/Maresca alongside landscape studies by her grandfather, Jean Schweckler, is also over-and-out, but those canvases, too, were *kvell*-worthy.

Then there are Josette Urso and Jill Nathanson, veteran abstractionists both. They have daunting exhibition records and the work is included in myriad public and private collections. These two painters have, in so many words, been around the block. But with their current shows, Ms. Urso and Ms. Nathanson have done, no, not the impossible, but something just as impressive. They’ve come up with their most ambitious and adventurous pictures to date.

Not every artist gets there; these ladies have. Let’s give a nod to tenacity, persistence and the slow-and-steady deepening of vision.

The title of Ms. Urso’s show at the Tenth Avenue location of Kathryn Markel Fine Arts is “Wildcard,” a nod to her improvisatory painterly approach. To hear the artist describe it, she’s an umpteenth-generation Cubist albeit refracted through 100 years of cultural shift-and-drift. Working from observation — looking at the things in her home, outside the window, and, apparently, on the IRT — Ms. Urso reconfigures the mundane by “looking off in every direction simultaneously.” Titles sometimes key us into a picture’s starting point; mostly, we’re left to our own devices.



Jill Nathanson, 'Learning Curve' (2021-23). Via Berry Campbell Gallery

The canvases are rich, layered, scrabbled, and encompassing. Can there be too much information in a single canvas? Apparently not: Each picture is a kaleidoscopic commingling of patterns, textures, diagrammatic notations, and bumptious, cartoony blips. The compositions suggest topographical landscapes put through a technological wringer. Ms. Urso’s hand is ever present, bringing a goofy vulnerability to the imagery.

The Markel show includes a gathering of diminutive watercolors, each of which is gracefully set into place, shimmery and evanescent. Yet it is with oils that Ms. Urso thrives, not least because the obdurate physicality of the stuff endows her whimsies with muscle and grit. That, and the oil paintings are sizable: The artist thrives when she has an abundant stretch of canvas on which to disperse her iconography. The best of them — “Run With You” and “Poolside” (both 2024) — don’t stop giving. Their bounty is profuse, as are their pleasures.

Berry Campbell has mounted “Jill Nathanson: Chord Field.” This is the gallery’s fourth showing of the artist’s studiously turned variations on Color Field painting, a mode of art-making in which expansive areas of color are applied through means that are “hands off.” Painters like Morris Louis, Helen Frankenthaler, and Jules Olitski opted for techniques that emphasized process over touch. Of course, “touch” manifests itself in a variety of ways. In Ms. Nathanson’s case, it is through the deliberate pouring of acrylics. The resulting scrimps of color take on a waxy tactility that radiates a muffled and elusive light.

Writing in the accompanying catalog, David Rhodes mentions how “The Death of Actaeon” (1559-76) by Titian is pivotal in understanding Ms. Nathanson’s art. What, you might wonder, does a Venetian Master have to do with a contemporary artist and her buckets of paint? Mr. Rhodes mentions “discord and unease” inherent to the Titian. Ms. Nathanson points to how its “coloristic action ... has been and continues to be totally gripping.” What Ms. Nathanson and *Signore* Tiziano share is the drama that can be generated through fraught delicacies of form.

Ms. Nathanson’s paintings are, for the most part, horizontal in format. Their orientation may be “landscape” and the range of colors employed organic — silty yellows, wan purples, and lustrous variations on green dominate — but the vertical forms that populate the compositions push toward the front of each picture with an insistence that is as silky as it is provisional. Tension is created through the careful consideration of edge, overlap, and rhythm. The pictures have presence.

The sweeping, unapologetic beauty of “Learning Curve” (2021) proves itself a benison at this uncertain historical moment. Couple that with Ms. Urso’s “Corduroy and the Fern” (2024) and you have a reason to feel good about the state of contemporary art.

*Jill Nathanson will be in conversation with Christine Berry on July 24 at 6:30 p.m. Contact Berry Campbell Gallery for more information.*