



ART REVIEW: Gallery Artists at Eric Firestone Probe Essential Questions

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by Charles A. Riley II

It seems appropriate that a visitor's first encounter with the current exhibition at the [Eric Firestone Gallery](#) in East Hampton should be sunlight banking off [Jen Stark's](#) Plexiglas "Radiate Mirror" near the front window.

The colors behind the meticulously cut form bounce wildly from the white paint on the wall, hovering in an intermediate space between work and viewer that is so unlike the usual optical experience of a painting or sculpture. The arresting effect stems in part from the fact that color is a reflection from a surface that is usually directed toward, rather than away from, the viewer's eye. Stark's *Radiate Mirror* serves as a beacon that guides the art lover to a safe harbor of meticulously made paintings, sculpture and photographs by artists in the Firestone stable, out of the choppy waters of the trendy or marketable to a quiet harbor of essential questions in aesthetics.



"Radiate Mirror" by Jen Stark, 2016. Mirrored plexi, latex paint, wood, 64 x 49 x 2 inches. Courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery.

For example: Isn't the main basis for the correlation of art and truth based at least in part upon how long the art maintains its resonance? That complex consideration is front and center in this exhibition of gallery artists, with works on view by significant figures from the 1950s through today.

It was the Latin poet Horace who asserted the primacy of the permanent truths of art over the ephemeral fads and crises of life, in the axiom, "ars longa, vita brevis" (roughly, "art is long, life is short"). Its aptness is nowhere more apparent than in the paintings on view from the '50s and '60s by [Paul Brach](#) and [Miriam Schapiro](#).

Having [raved](#) on this site about a recent show at the Manhattan gallery run by Eric Firestone of paintings from the California years of the Toronto-born Schapiro, I was eager to see more of her work in the current show. She was a significant leader in feminist art and a pioneer as well of the interrelationship between computer programming and painting when she lived in California.



"Audit" by Miriam Schapiro, 1971. Collage and acrylic on canvas, 84 x 78.5 inches. Courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery.

The current show boasts one of Schapiro's major paintings from the 1960s that has all the hallmarks of her geometric period. Its crisp edges trace flowing forms, orange over blue, that intersect with the utopian precision of a perfectly planned metropolis. While Schapiro's spatial puzzles are related to the early days of computer graphics, what struck me as particularly marvelous about this work is the way it testified to her own fantastic ability to turn complex spatial relationships inside out.

Here she shows a sure hand in flipping perspective and reimagining the insides and outsides of the structure in her head, and not just on a screen. The final test of these imaginative acrobatics, of course, is the consummate skill with which she translates the whole into a large-scale, vibrant painting that reads so beautifully.

One of the pleasant surprises of this group show is an untitled Abstract Expressionist painting by Schapiro's husband, Paul Brach, founding dean of CalArts and a terrific colorist who took an entirely different path to painting from the clean geometric methodology of his wife. Their full time home and studio was in East Hampton from 1998 until his death in 2007.



"Untitled" by Paul Brach, 1957. Oil on canvas, 70 x 60 inches. Courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery.

Sculpture is another strength of the show. A totemic blue wooden piece by [Sidney Geist](#) stands unobtrusively by the partition midway into the gallery, like Robert Benchley elegantly quaffing martinis and offering snide remarks out of the side of his mouth at a swank Sutton Place party. Geist was not just a prolific sculptor and a major Soho figure, but also a critic of note (his pen name was Otis Gage) and an expert on [Brancusi](#), whose rippling silhouette is a decided influence on the blue painted wooden figure in the gallery.



"Studded Figure" by Sidney Geist, 1957. Painted wood, 85 inches. Courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery.

The louder sculptor in the room, playing Dorothy Parker to Geist's Benchley, is [Mia Fonssagrives-Solow](#), whose two large, standing pieces gleam with the high finish of enamel on fiberglass. The bubblegum pink piece catching all the attention is *Sail Form*. Meanwhile, a tabletop version in wood on a shelf offers a more organic feeling for form and finish, its polished grain finish less industrial than the bubblegum pink of the standing version. Still, I liked the oval opening of Fonssagrives-Solow's *Egg Plomb*, a high-tech update of a Henry Moore that had real élan.

The way art endures over time, and reflects on its passage, is also the theme of the work on view in the inner recesses of the Firestone Project space, where the large-format photographs made by the flamboyant, Hong-Kong born [Tseng Kwong Chi](#) are found. Having lived on the Lower East Side, many of the subjects as well as their digs were familiar, and I am susceptible not just to the nostalgic but to the historical significance of the large-scale photographs of [Keith Haring](#) and [Jean Michel Basquiat](#) in their studios.



"Haring in Pop Shop (sit in window)" by Tseng Kwong Chi, New York, 1986. Digital chromogenic print, 30 x 30 inches. Courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery.

I do not remember Tseng, who died at 39 in 1990 from complications from AIDS, except through the widely circulated anecdote about how he crashed the Met costume gala in 1980 under the guise of being a consular official from mainland China. He left behind more than 100,000 images (only the large portraits are on view). Some are portraits of the cultural heroes of the day before they were famous or just on the verge, and others are satirical self-portraits in a Mao jacket and sunglasses in front of famous architectural monuments, posing as an "Ambiguous Ambassador" of Asian culture. As some wag remarked, he was "a cross between Ansel Adams and Cindy Sherman."

The most compelling of his works are the unabashedly celebratory portraits of both Haring and Basquiat. Others include [Kenny Scharf](#), Philip Taaffe, Madonna, Grace Jones, the B-52s, and Fab Five Freddy, essentially the guest list of the wildest parties in the era.

Invested with some of the heroically bohemian defiance that one sees in the Fantin-Latour or Manet group portraits of the Impressionists gathered in a studio or café in the 19th century, they prove that Tseng had a prescient sense of who would make it to the history books, even if he and some of this subjects never made it past the decade they celebrated. It might have seemed an elegiac and subdued finish to an exciting show if the look in the eyes of the artists, then in their absolute prime, was not so full of promise.

BASIC FACTS: “Fall Show 2016” featuring gallery artists Sydney Butchkes, Jorge Fick, Miriam Schapiro, Mia Fonssagrives-Solow, Jen Stark, Agathe Snow, Wendy White and others on view September 8 to October 31, 2016 at Eric Firestone Gallery, 4 Newtown Lane, East Hampton, NY 11937. www.ericfirestonegallery.com

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