

# The New York Times

## Last Chance: Warhol, Basquiat and Other History Lessons

By ROBERTA SMITH JUNE 10, 2016



A selection of works from “Ed Ruscha: Ribbon Words: 1967-1973.”

Right now the New York gallery world is awash in what are often called museum-quality shows. This term generally refers to outstanding commercial-gallery exhibitions of historical material — anything 30 years or older — that might almost as easily be in a museum.

These shows are good for raising galleries’ profiles and burnishing their brands, and also as selling tools, even though the art in them is usually borrowed and not for sale. They’re sort of like a gallery’s back room, exploded into the main space. They help collectors testing waters: Objects that arrive as loans to these shows sometimes shift to “on consignment,” available for sale.

From a more elevated perspective, exhibitions of this kind can be valuable public services: The best fill in historical gaps you didn’t know you had, and compensate for museums limited in time, money or curatorial vision. And the foremost advantage of museum-quality gallery shows is that they’re not in museums. They’re usually seen under quieter, less crowded conditions, without entrance fees.



Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody; Photograph by Adam Reich

The abundant historical shows right now concentrate on blue-chip art, isolating aspects of extremely prominent artists' work. In Chelsea, you can see middle-period works by the painter Philip Guston at Hauser & Wirth (through July 29), as well as Jasper Johns's monotypes at Matthew Marks and Sigmar Polke's paintings from the 1980s and early '90s at David Zwirner (both through June 25).

Further examples can be found uptown at less well-known galleries, most notably two show organized by the Austrian curator Dieter Buchhart that focus on language.

One is "Ed Ruscha: Ribbon Words: 1967-1973" a dense, elegant "all-loan show," according to the checklist, at the Edward Tyler Nahem gallery (through July 1). Its 51 drawings, mostly in gun powder, tease sly, worldly words spelled out in either looping ribbon or folded pieces of paper into superb explorations of language, space and perspective.

"Hollywood," "Cut Lip," "Sin" (three versions), "Fireproofing a Tiny Box" and "Corrosive Liquids" alternately sit on solid planes or float above them, recede in the distance, emerge from shadows or loom like skyscrapers. Mr. Ruscha began this series by simply writing out words, including his name. They hug the paper, but shine with potential.



"Untitled (Hand Anatomy)" (1982), part of "Words Are All We Have: Paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat" at Nahmad Contemporary. The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat/Licensed by Artestar, New York

The second of Mr. Buchhart's shows is "Words Are All We Have: Paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat" at Nahmad Contemporary (through June 18), a handsome review of two dozen paintings from 1982 to 1988, most of Basquiat's brief career. They suggest that his main achievement lies in turning words into images, creating paintings that, in effect, talk a kind of cultural stream-of-consciousness.

Their joining of spiky letters, hieroglyphs and images convey an innately sophisticated, roving intelligence — sports, jazz, American history, the Bible, the human skeleton, colonialism — undergirded by a profound understanding of the greatness and pathos of African-American achievement. This exhibition is not only museum quality, but it also forms a perfect addition to the Brooklyn Museum's recent examination of Basquiat's notebooks and poetry.

As a chaser, don't miss "Andy Warhol: Little Electric Chairs" at Venus Over Manhattan, next door to Nahmad. The gallery, which does not represent artists, is no stranger to museum-worthy exhibitions, as proved last season by ones devoted to Peter Saul and H.C. Westermann. But its Warhol show (through June 25) takes the convention in an unexpected direction: part fancy window display, part installation art.



An installation shot of "Andy Warhol: Little Electric Chairs" at Venus Over Manhattan.

It's nothing if not sparse. Two paintings are isolated on separate walls: a full-size electric-chair painting in gold slurred across blue, green and pink, and the gem that is "Twelve Electric Chairs," a grid of small canvases in different colors. In addition, there are six individual small paintings to be seen in a specially built gallery the size of a chapel or an execution chamber. You may leave thinking that if this strange, atmospheric arrangement doesn't sell some paintings, nothing will.

A new twist in digging up history is working shallow — closer to the present — to enhance the reputations of younger artists with shows of unfamiliar work, as in an imposing exhibition of the 1980s paintings by the German-born painter Charline von Heyl and the 15-year drawing retrospective of Seth Price, staged last year by the Petzel gallery, which represents both artists, in its uptown space.

Petzel uptown is showing vigorous expressionist paintings by the leading Cobra artist, Asger Jorn (through July 29), although he actually looked stronger in an earlier Cobra show at Blum & Poe.

Exhibitions of this kind are nothing new, though until two or three decades ago they were concentrated in galleries whose main emphasis was on historical material. In the past 20 years or so, they have become normal for galleries committed foremost to contemporary art.

The first museum-worthy show I recall in a mostly contemporary art gallery was the knockout “Picasso Notebooks” at Pace Gallery in 1986, which traveled for two years to museums in the United States and Europe.

Things came to an open boil in 2009 when the Gagosian Gallery had two stunning shows, back-to-back: a retrospective of the Italian postwar artist Piero Manzoni in its 24th Street space and a survey of Picasso’s late paintings in its space on 21st Street. Not incidentally, Larry Gagosian built this hangar-size structure a few years earlier to meet museum loan requirements. The historical shows he has mounted here and elsewhere in his realm, along with his Richard Serra shows, may form whatever place he has in art history.

Now it seems that a museum-quality show or two each season is de rigueur, a necessary sign of a gallery having arrived or at least trying very hard to do so. It is worth remembering that this tendency has some modest origins, like Mitchell Albus, who opened a tiny gallery on Thompson Street in 1992, showings artists barely seen since the 1960s, including Edward Avedisian, George Ortman and Robert Mallery. Today Mr. Albus is in his fourth space, on Delancey Street, operating in much the same fashion, showing what he wants to show and getting by.