

GAGOSIAN

artnet® news

**‘New York Has Always Been About Light to Me’: Artist Mary Weatherford Turns On the Neon for Her Inaugural Show at Gagosian**  
*Combining athleticism and neon has made Mary Weatherford a rising star at 55.*

Sarah Cascone



*Portrait of Mary Weatherford. Photo by Lee Jaffe.*

Any time an artist signs with Gagosian, it’s a big deal. But for 55-year-old Mary Weatherford, the most exciting thing about joining the world’s biggest gallery just might have been the chance to show in the dealer’s New York flagship, a converted parking garage on 24th Street with clerestory windows just below the ceiling that let in the perfect amount of natural light.

“I wanted to make a show for this architecture,” the artist admitted to *artnet News* during a tour of the exhibition, which contains a year’s worth of large-scale paintings, all made with this specific space in mind. Weatherford is based in Los Angeles, and it was a drive at dusk in Bakersfield that inspired her to begin adding neon lights on the surface of her abstract paintings, but presenting these works in New York seems like a natural fit.

“New York has always been about light to me,” Weatherford added, citing the neon signs shaped like a hanger in the dry cleaner window as an example. She likens the end result of her own neon accents to an inverted Lucio Fontana painting. Where he cuts slits in the canvas, the neon almost makes a hole in the viewer’s vision, as if there’s a part of the painting you cannot see.

Weatherford sources the hollow glass tubes for her neon in Murano, Venice, but they arrive milled stick-straight, too stiff and unyielding to pair with her gestural compositions. (All neon signs, if you didn't know, are specially blown to order from standard tubes.)

Since Weatherford's first forays into the unusual medium, she's turned to a sign-making company in San Diego to bend the glass into more subtly crooked shapes, based on drawing patterns she provides. There might be as many as 100 pieces of glass stocked in the studio at any given time.



*Mary Weatherford, GLORIA (2018). Photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio, courtesy of Gagolian. ©Mary Weatherford*

The massive paintings are made using vinyl-based Flashe paint on linen canvasses made specially for the artist at a Belgian mill, from flax grown in nearby fields. Working in solitude—even knowing someone else is in the building can be a distraction for Weatherford—she lays out the canvas on a perfectly level wooden platform, pouring water across the surface before adding her pigment, which she manipulates with grouting sponges. The artist likens the process to that of a child playing with silt in the bottom of a rain puddle.

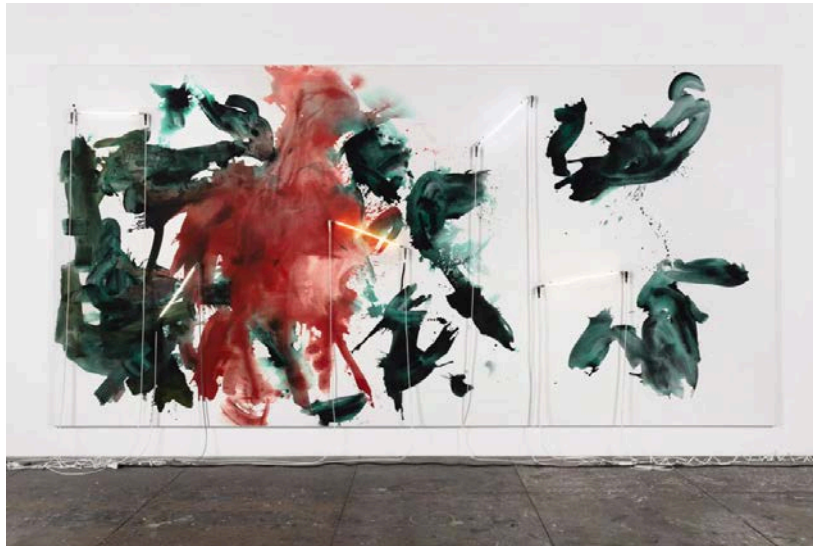
Weatherford's paintings are deceptively effortless looking—bright blooms of color spread across the canvas in sweeping arcs. But the process is actually incredibly physically taxing. The artist draws on her dance background—“even though I'm a mediocre dancer,” she qualified—to make each work.

“It's an athletic situation,” Weatherford admitted, pointing out a mark that perfectly corresponds to the reach of her arm. “There's so much of it that's the movement of my body.”

There's also a huge element of surprise involved: Depending on how much water she uses, the paintings are essentially invisible to the artist as she is working, only emerging after the canvas has dried. “Because the water reflects, I can't really see what's going to happen. It's a quite a mystery,” Weatherford explained. “As the water dries overnight and the pigment sinks into the

painting, it's like watching a photograph develop. I come in the next morning and the image is there."

Weatherford found that animals emerged as something of a recurring theme in this show. Upon closer examination, paintings that at first blush appear abstract reveal the suggestion of an eagle, a horse head, or the foot of a conch shell. "The revelation in this exhibition is the figuration," the artist said. "There are many animals in this show. You might miss these on first glance."



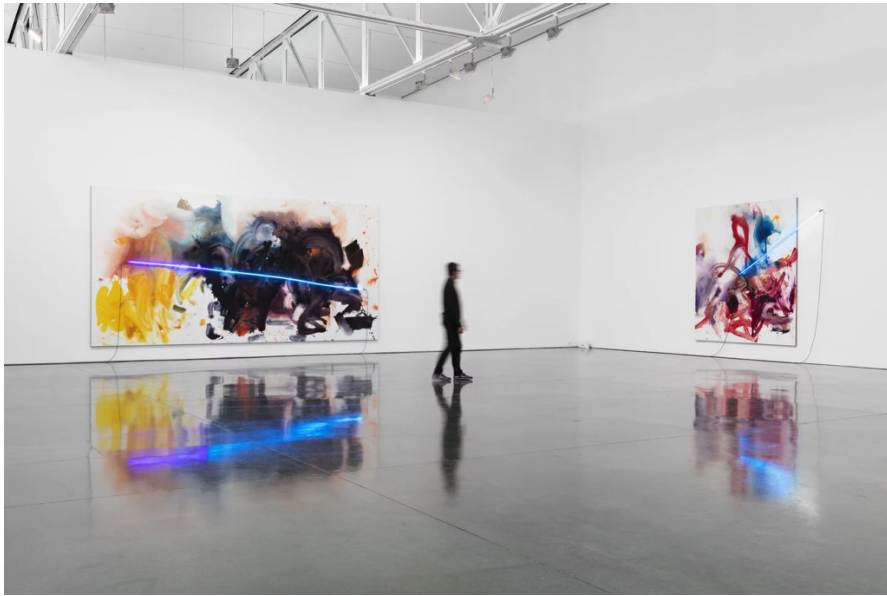
*Mary Weatherford, Cock Robin (2018). Photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio, courtesy of Gagosian. ©Mary Weatherford*

*Cock Robin* is a reference to the old British children's rhyme "Who Killed Cock Robin?" with its cast of animals, all complicit in a murder. In the painting, the bird's red breast is pierced with the white neon, as if the sparrow has just loosed his "little bow and arrow."

There are also art historical references. The brilliantly blue *Double Horse Head*, for instance, is inspired by Georgia O'Keeffe's famous skull paintings. "I've gone to the ghost ranch and climbed up into the tower and looked out at the landscape she painted," Weatherford said. "What struck me was that her colors weren't exaggerated."

With the four vaguely menacing figures of 2018, suffused with an aura of foreboding violence, she had in mind Francisco Goya's haunting "Black Paintings." "This show runs between the deeply evil and the transcendent," the artist said.

Other recurring themes include mythology and the cosmos. One painting, *Athena*, which the artist likens to a thunderbolt, represents the birth of the goddess fully grown, from her father Zeus's helmet. She describes the gorgeously celestial *The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars (Take the A Train)* as "a reference to the universe in a drop of water" as well as graffiti-covered subway cars and Duke Ellington. It represents "a confluence of the urban and the ethereal."



*“Mary Weatherford: I’ve Seen Gray Whales Go By,” installation view at Gagosian (2018). Photo Fredrik Nilsen Studio, courtesy of Gagosian. ©Mary Weatherford.*

For all the works, the last step is adding the neon, which comes in a range of colors. The choice can radically change each piece. “It’s like having a paint box,” Weatherford said.

She introduced neon into her paintings in 2012, and it was an immediate revelation—at once a bold new direction for her work and a natural extension of two decades of exploring ways to disrupt the surface of the canvas with elements such as seashells, sequins, and sponges. A new level of success soon followed, with work at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in “Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World” (2014–15), and, last fall, the invitation to join Gagosian.

But Weatherford doesn’t see neon as the end of her artistic journey. The artist doesn’t want her recent success to invalidate her earlier work, and she reserves the right to continue to grow and change. “I think it’s important not to say that this is the answer,” she said. “I hope nobody’s going to hold me to this.”

See more works from the show below.



*Mary Weatherford, 2018 (2018). Photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio, courtesy of Gagosian. ©Mary Weatherford*



*“Mary Weatherford: I’ve Seen Gray Whales Go By,” installation view at Gagosian (2018). Photo Fredrik Nilsen Studio, courtesy of Gagosian. ©Mary Weatherford.*





*Mary Weatherford, The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars (Take the A Train), 2018 (detail). Photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio, courtesy of Gagolian. ©Mary Weatherford*



*Mary Weatherford, The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars (Take the A Train), 2018 (detail). Photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio, courtesy of Gagolian. ©Mary Weatherford*



*Mary Weatherford, The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars (Take the A Train), 2018. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio, courtesy of Gagolian. ©Mary Weatherford*



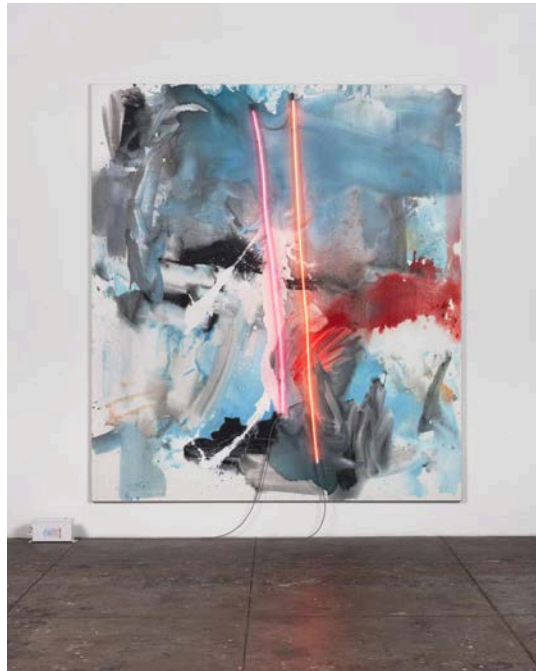
*Mary Weatherford, The Gate (2018). Photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio, courtesy of Gagosian. ©Mary Weatherford*



*“Mary Weatherford: I’ve Seen Gray Whales Go By,” installation view at Gagosian (2018). Photo Fredrik Nilsen Studio, courtesy of Gagosian. ©Mary Weatherford.*

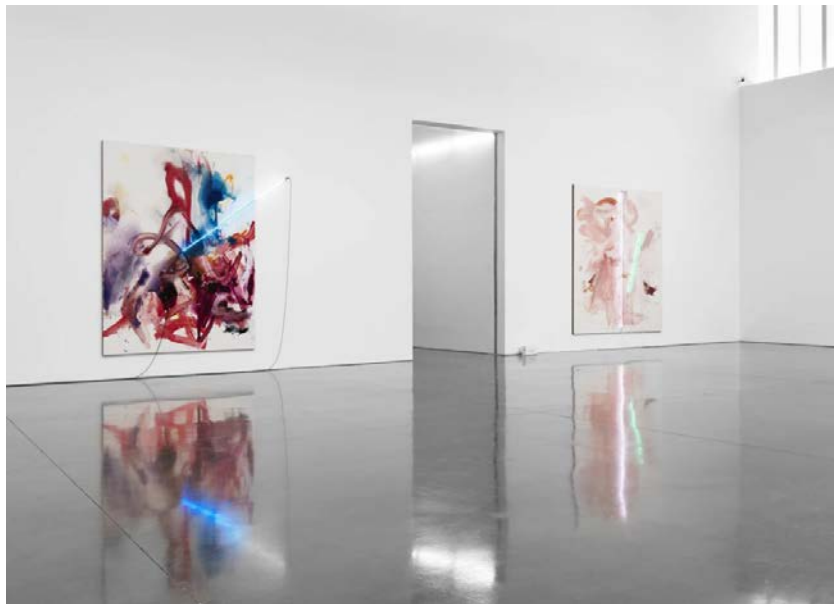


*Mary Weatherford, Cosmos (2018). Photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio, courtesy of Gagosian. ©Mary Weatherford*



*Mary Weatherford, Athena (2018). Photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio, courtesy of Gagosian. ©Mary Weatherford*





*"Mary Weatherford: I've Seen Gray Whales Go By," installation view at Gagosian (2018). Photo Fredrik Nilsen Studio, courtesy of Gagosian. ©Mary Weatherford.*



*Mary Weatherford, Bird of Paradise (2018). Photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio, courtesy of Gagosian. ©Mary Weatherford*