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New York Galleries: What to See Right Now

Georg Baselitz takes on other artists' self-portraits; Vivian Browne's "Little Men" is a blast from the past; Enrico Riley's 'New World' paintings; and Pamela Colman Smith, beyond the tarot cards.

Roberta Smith



Installation view of Georg Baselitz's new show, "Devotion," at Gagosian Gallery. Credit Credit Georg Baselitz, via Gagosian; Rob McKeever

It's fashionable to ridicule Georg Baselitz, one of the richer white male painters around, especially since he opined in an interview in 2013 that female painters could not summon the brutality necessary for greatness or at least market success. But the market is a suspect measure. And while something like brutality definitely figures in ambition and originality, it can't be limited to male definitions, which is too bad for men and not the problem of women.

It's tempting to respond to such ignorance by shunning the artist, but that matches know-nothingness with more of the same, and certainty with certainty. I recommend "Devotion," Mr. Baselitz's exhibition at Gagosian, for its gnarly ink drawings based mostly on self-portraits by other painters. These portraits of self-portraits combine automatic drawing and caricature with riffs on the styles of their sources, be they Henri Rousseau, Willem de Kooning or Andy Warhol, revealing a talent for mimicry that might be the artist's strongest. The heads are inverted as

usual, blending the artist's fusion of abstraction and representation with unusual vehemence. They have an eruptive sardonic energy; devotion mixes with a sharply humorous misanthropic edge.

All artists create fictive worlds that help them survive. This includes floating uninformed, attention-grabbing opinions — like, say, Donald Judd's insistence on painting's death. The exhibition suggests that Mr. Baselitz may be walking his position on female painters back a little bit, if far from enough. For example, he might have included Frida Kahlo, an unblinking self-portraitist. But he's added Joan Mitchell, Nicole Eisenman and Tracey Emin to two painters he has previously mentioned: Paula Modersohn-Becker and Cecily Brown. And three of the five living artists in the show are female and also the youngest. That says a great deal about where the future of the medium lies.