

ABATTOIR



THE PLAIN DEALER

Abattoir Gallery's current show promotes enjoyment of beautiful paintings, free of politics and Art World bluster



A large detail of "Untitled," 2023, by Scott Olson.

By [Steven Litt, cleveland.com](http://StevenLitt.cleveland.com)

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Go ahead, enjoy yourself. It's allowed at Abattoir Gallery in Cleveland.

The gallery's name, which means slaughterhouse in French, is a nod to its location at a one-time meatpacking plant in a two-room suite in the Hildebrandt Building at 3619 Walton Avenue.

Despite any unpleasant associations with offal or meat hanging on hooks that might be caused by its name and location, Abattoir's mission is to dish up highly palatable art.

Launched in 2020 by veteran independent, Cleveland-based curators Lisa Kurzner and Rose Burlingham, the small, for-profit gallery has in part filled a niche once occupied by gallerist William Busta, who made it his mission to show the best work by the best artists in Northeast Ohio. (Busta is still conducting projects out of an office on Waterloo Road in Collinwood.) Abattoir's purview, though, is national in scope.

The current exhibition, titled, "Headspace: A Painting Show," on view through April 15, offers a glimpse of works by six mid-career painters from Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut who are thriving largely outside the New York City art ecology.



"Study for Lazarus," 2020, by Emil Robinson.



"Range of Motion," 2022, by Eleanor Conover.

Participants include Eleanor Conover, an assistant professor of art and art history at Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA; Georgia Elrod, who works in Brooklyn and in Hudson, a small city along the Hudson River in Columbia County, NY; and Fox Hysen, who lives in Norfolk, Conn., and runs an artists' collective and residency program called Greenwoods, 2058. Also in the show are works by Emil Robinson, an associate professor at the University of Cincinnati; Matthew Kolodziej, a professor of art at the University of Akron; and Scott Olson, who lives in Kent, OH.

What also unites all of them is that they're focused on making abstract or representational works whose primary goal is to provide visual pleasure, not to critique systemic power imbalances in contemporary society.

There's certainly a place for art that strives for justice and afflicts the comfortable. But there should also be room for art that simply rewards attention with fresh investigations of beauty, however defined.

Liberating consciousness to experience pleasure in itself, free of any other justification, could itself be a revolutionary act in a capitalist world, and Abattoir's current show appears to be in line with that kind of thinking.

The one possible exception to the show's apolitical mood could be Robinson's 2021 painting "Arrangement with T Square," which depicts a cross-like drafting tool hanging on a panel draped with meticulously depicted rectangles of yellow and blue fabric that clearly bring to mind the Ukrainian flag whether or not the artist intended it.



"Cover 2," 2022, by Matthew Kolodziej.

So is the painting about the crucifixion of Ukraine? When asked, Kurzner said no. Certainly, the painting seems to be less about current events than Robinson's desire to combine near-abstract imagery with subtle references to religion, such as the imagery of the T square. But the Ukrainian national colors are also there, and anyone is free to see them, regardless of the artist's intentions.

Robinson does appear interested in religious symbolism, as indicated by the title of his 2020 painting, "Study for Lazarus." Roughly a quarter of the size of his T-square painting, it depicts two autumn leaves, one big, one small, pressed flat against the picture plane in the bottom half of the painting, with a misty landscape visible in the upper half. The beautiful imagery, painted in a style reminiscent of Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings of autumn leaves at Lake George in the 1920s, is open-ended enough to enable a variety of interpretations, along with the enjoyment of Robinson's paint handling and subtle palette.

The rest of the painters in the show are abstractionists bent on exploring and adapting traditions deeply rooted in 20th-century modernism.

Olson, for example, is represented by a single abstraction painted in 2023 in oil on panel that expands on early 20th-century Cubism, a movement launched by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. Olson's painting describes folded and curved planes organized roughly in a grid. The work leads the eye on a journey across visually shallow spaces that could also be deep and distant. Painted in somber hues with luminous, jewel-toned accents, it blurs distinctions between landscape and still life. It's a geometric world that could be both close-up and far away.

Although his paintings are abstract, Kolodziej also revels in the idea of exploiting tensions between nearby and faraway spaces in his paintings. His colorful paintings contrast areas of airbrushed curlicue marks that seem distant, misty and blurred, with up-close areas of color applied with tools that create crisp, sharp, and dry textures that seem to sit right up on top of the picture plane. The eye toggles pleurably back and forth between marks that appear to ride on top of the surface and those that recede.

Conover's mission is to expand on the language of Color Field abstraction from the late 1950s and '60s, a style pioneered by artists such as Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis, who poured liquid paint directly on their canvases. Using canvases shaped like windsurfing sails, Conover creates areas of softly blooming color that appear to reference rural landscapes.

Elrod's small, elegant abstractions hint at vignettes of the human body framed by shallow, stage-like spaces in a visual language somewhat reminiscent of early 20th-century American abstract painter Arthur Dove. Elrod's sensibility is playful and mystical. She's also highly skilled at making brush marks that neatly and wittily match the shapes of the forms she's describing. Curved shapes are defined by curved strokes, for example. The result is a sense of well-organized whimsy.

Hysen's paintings describe grids and stripes with roughly applied paint, expanding on motifs explored by a broad cross-section of artists from Jasper Johns to Sean Scully and Gerhard Richter. What distinguishes her work is a luminous sense of color, tending toward the blue end of the spectrum, leavened by tones of gray and rose. She also has a uniquely brusque way of handling paint that creates incidents on her rich surfaces that catch the eye.

Like so many other shows mounted by Abattoir over the past few years, "Headspace" is dreamy, thoughtful, compelling, and fun. The quality is high, and the selections are sharp and knowledgeable. In other words, it's worth anyone's time to go and have a look.

Note: An earlier version of this story misstated Fox Hysen's gender.

REVIEW

What's up: "Headspace — A Painting Show."

Venue: Abattoir Gallery

Where: 3619 Walton Ave., Suite C 102, Cleveland

When: Through Saturday, April 15.

Admission: Free. Call 216-820-1260 or 646-229-0998, or go to abattoirgallery.com.