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A New York School Standout

*And other gallery shows worth seeing*By **LANCE ESPLUND***New York*

"Mercedes Matter: A Retrospective Exhibition"

Sidney Mishkin Gallery

Baruch College

135 E. 22nd St.

Through Dec. 14

One of the best New York painting exhibitions is not in a museum but in a gallery, and off the beaten path. The traveling Mercedes Matter retrospective of 33 well-chosen works spanning her entire career, though it should be much larger and headlining a museum, gives us, in a nutshell, the monumental achievement of a monumental, but sadly overlooked, artist.

A central figure of the New York School, Matter (1913-2001) studied with Fernand Léger and Hans Hofmann; but important also were her father the painter Arthur B. Carles (a student of Matisse), her friends Giacometti and de Kooning and her husband the photographer and graphic designer Herbert Matter. Included in this show are extremely accomplished early works from her teens; Fauvist-inspired nudes, still lifes and landscapes, as well as pure abstractions, all from her 20s; and the masterly drawings and paintings—the crowded, jostling, mountainous still lifes, in quicksilver-charcoal line and bold, racing color—of her mature period. Some of these late works rank among the finest the New York School has to offer.

Matter's own legacy lives on not just through her artwork but also through her teaching at the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture, which she co-founded in 1964. Unfortunately, the organizers of the lavish monograph that accompanies the show don't seem to trust entirely in the strength of Matter's art: A seminude portrait photograph of Matter (taken by her husband) graces the book's cover, and throughout the catalog undue emphasis is placed on Matter's more-famous male peers. Her powerful paintings and drawings, however, are the strongest form of rebuttal.

The exhibition will travel on to Pepperdine University's Weisman Museum of Art in Malibu, Calif.; Guild Hall in East Hampton, N.Y.; and Knox College's Figge Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa.

"Sarah MacCulloch: New Paintings"

Kathryn Markel Fine Arts

529 W. 20th St.

Through Nov. 14

In her first U.S. solo show, landscape painter Sara MacCulloch does a lot with a little. Working plein-air and alla prima, painting the fields, forests, rivers, roads and coastlines of England and of her native Nova Scotia, her attack is swift, subtle, fluid and sweeping. But mostly it is spare.

The 16 easel-scale oils on view here were each completed in a single session. They present us with shorthand, almost calligraphic approaches to fleeting naturalism—somewhere between the poetic distillation of Chinese landscape painting and the understated directness of the later seascapes of Fauvist Albert Marquet. Mist-filled atmosphere and buttery light, deep expanses of sandy beach, sky and farmland spread across her pictures in wispy impressions and creamy hues. At their best, as in "Winter River" (2009), in which a dusk-violet haze is balanced against impastoed snow, or in "Fields, England" (2009), in which yellow-, blue- and lime-green fields are complemented by a purple-gray sky, an adherence to natural light and space save the paintings from all but disappearing. However, Ms. MacCulloch's forms, especially her trees, can occasionally lack the particularity and punch necessary to bring them to life. Carried by virtuosity and insouciance, her pictures can feel too spare, if not too slight, generalized and easily achieved. Missing that something essential that sets them apart as paintings—as opposed to pretty pictures—they can risk being merely beautiful.

"Richard Tuttle: Renaissance Unframed"

Carolina Nitsch Project Room

534 W. 22nd St.

Through Jan. 9, 2010

No artist can do as little as Richard Tuttle (b. 1941) and get away with it. And no other artist can get as much mileage out of the playful, the incidental, the simply witty or the throwaway. If Mr. Tuttle's pared-down version of art—shadows on wood grain; a short length of rope nailed to the wall—never completely satisfies, it usually intrigues, disarms or makes one smile.

To enter a show of Mr. Tuttle's works is to force oneself to look beyond the so-called art and to take in the environment. The changing exhibition "Renaissance Unframed" (1995/2009)—titled in part because it unravels notions of classical painting and painting space—is making its debut in New York. The work is a series of 25 encaustic drawings/prints on small folded pieces of muslin, each draped, pinned to the wall and accompanied by a small bronze sculpture placed on the floor. Only half of the series is on view. But a red light shining down on the gallery floor alerts viewers to look up, where attached to the ceiling are thumbnail copies of the entire series—promises of what's to come. The show's press release claims that "Renaissance Unframed," as if it were expanding outside the gallery walls and beyond, "symbolize[s] the entire world." Never mind. It's all part of the artwork's less-is-more absurdity; it's all

part of the fun.

—Mr. Esplund writes about art for the Journal.

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