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Jess Fuller: 'Planet Without a Body'

By ROBERTA SMITH FEB. 5, 2015

In this terrific show, Jess Fuller exuberantly meets the challenge of inventing her own way to make paintings. Combining a parodic masculinity with intimations of women's work, these big, squarish canvases boast a generous internal scale. They initially look simple and ham-handed but then reveal many subtle details.

The dominant method is a coarse form of collage or thread-free appliqué: Flattened volumes of canvas resembling empty, irregular pillowcases are applied to stretched canvases over big blocks of saturated color. The smaller canvas shapes can be elongated, undulant, forked or biomorphic. They evoke enlarged brush strokes and also the impure, suggestive geometries of Brancusi, Jean Arp, David Smith, Myron Stout and Elizabeth Murray. Some of Ms. Fuller's compositions dance like the figures in El Greco's "The Vision of Saint John" at the Met, others levitate, as in a Matisse cutout.

The paint is applied every which way: stained, brushed, sprayed or stenciled. It skips down the sewn shapes, sometimes bringing to mind Barnett Newman's zips — sort of. The shapes themselves can serve as stencils, with much use made of off-register placement and visual echoes. The shapes are often pale against the saturated grounds: lightly stained, coated with white gesso, or bare, they evince a range of quiet tonalities of raw to cooked canvas. Their edges hint at stronger colors on their reverse sides, creating bits of glow. Sometimes we see these colors because the shapes are twisted or off kilter — their seams showing. Ms. Fuller's process is ebulliently transparent, alternately planned and improvised — and eminently satisfying. It seems that whatever went into making a painting stays in the painting.

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