

May 2015 Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

On “Keith A. Smith: The Fabric Works: 1964–1980” at Bruce Silverstein; “Karen Schwartz: Down the Rabbit Hole” at Life on Mars Gallery; “Mel Bernstine” at McKenzie Fine Art; “Graham Nickson: Spectrum” at Betty Cunningham Gallery; “Louise P. Sloane: Recent Paintings” at Andre Zarre Gallery & “Arts in Bushwick: Making History” at Storefront Ten Eyck



Karen Schwartz, Shadow of His Former Self (2014), Mixed Media Wood Panel and Linen, 72 x 66

The Life on Mars Gallery, in Bushwick’s 56 Bogart Street building, promises to be “about painters and painting” and “painting’s continued relevance in the age of digital media.” Many galleries make such a claim. Michael David, the founder of Life on Mars, delivers on it, putting himself in harm’s way. As a painter who used to exhibit his own encaustic abstractions at Sidney Janis Gallery and Knoedler, David was poisoned by the gases of his own wax medium. His legs remain partially paralyzed by the exposure.

The specter of painting to the extreme reflects on David's other history, as a bassist for New York punk bands. Most notably this included an early version of the Plasmatics, an extreme act that was later headlined by the late Wendy O. Williams, a frontwoman known for chain-sawing guitars on stage, blowing up cars, and inviting charges of public indecency. At Life on Mars, David continues to play backup for such female leads, as several expressionistic women have been part of recent group and solo shows, including Katherine Bradford, Joyce Pensato, Amy Sillman, Brenda Goodman, and Fran O'Neill, whose exhibition I wrote about earlier this year.

Now on view at Life on Mars is Karen Schwartz, a painter based in Atlanta and Long Island presenting her first solo New York exhibition.² I was only able to see the paintings scheduled for this exhibition as they were being prepared to go on view, so I missed the works on paper and Margrit Lewczuk's abstractions scheduled for the project room.

Schwartz does not back down from a fight. She wrestles with oils and acrylics. Abstract forms turn into human figures only to become effaced. Layers of paint react against resisting agents. Colors drip and run. Scraped-up pigment ends up stuck to surfaces. *Shadow of His Former Self* (2014) may be the most successful. Here even the painting surface is uneven, with a canvas stuck to a deeper panel of wood. On the left, a ghost-like form fades in the background. On the right, a fleshy nose enters the frame. The psychological weight of Schwartz's figures can be heavy, at times overbearing, so I appreciate her lighter colors and shots of humor. Another example: *Pink Lady* (2014), where a scrawl of red lipstick finishes off a figure in a flourish of punk acidity.