

Thinking Big: Artists of Blue Mountain Gallery at Westbeth

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SCALING UP

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“Thinking Big” presents multiple takes on the theme of large-scale art. A joint effort involving a number of Blue Mountain Gallery artists, this exhibit grew out of a widespread frustration with the size constraints of the annual member shows in Chelsea. “We have a gallery with a lot of artists in it, and when we have a group show it is overhung and there are severe size limitations,” Ms. Finnegan said. “Here we had an opportunity to spread out.” With four large rooms, totaling 2,900 square feet of exhibition space, Westbeth Gallery offered an opportunity to scale up.

In reference to a work of art, the term “scale” can be confusing. The word can refer to the physical size of an artwork or it can pertain to the inner proportions of a piece. Scale is also sometimes used to describe the impact of art; the scale of a diminutive work might be said to express a sense of monumentality.

While it was once the case that large-format paintings and sculptures were nearly always site-specific commissions, today artists have creative freedom to work at any size. Yet here in New York finding affordable space to make and store artwork can be a challenge. So when an artist makes the impractical decision to scale up, it can be instructive for a viewer to consider the question: Why does it have to be that size?

Likewise, when an artist in this show makes the decision to display a small or a medium-size work, the viewer is invited to consider what it means to “think big.”

In an essay on the subject of scale in art, art historians Joan Kee and Emanuele Lugli blur the line between “explicit size” and “implicit size,” arguing, “what matters instead is the ‘internal scale’ that a particular size generates.” They write: “This explains, for example, why Michelangelo’s

Madonna of the Stairs is a monumental work despite its size of approximately fifty-six by forty centimetres, roughly the dimensions of a desktop computer screen.”¹

Despite the variety of approaches to scale on display, the pieces here can be grouped into a handful of themes.

PHYSICALITY

Making a large-format artwork is physically demanding. Covering a big canvas forces a painter to move from side to side, to reach high, to bend low, to back up. Inner proportion can also be impacted by a scale jump; the arrangement of shapes in larger works can relate more to the body, as opposed to the mind, imbuing an artwork with a physical presence. Both Robert Alberetti and Leslie K. Brill delved into the physical implications of a scale jump. Mr. Alberetti used “ice picks, nails, palette knives and razors” to create “The Site,” 2008. And Ms. Brill says she “worked from the shoulder, rather than the wrist.”

BIG LANDSCAPES

Though the gallery now includes abstract artists, Blue Mountain Gallery was initially founded as a space to exhibit representational art. Today, members Theresa Bartol, Nancy Beal, Michael Chelminski, Marcia Clark, Margaret Grimes, Marjorie Kramer, Margaret Leveson, Erica Child Prud’homme and Marie Van Elder still disclose a reverence for the natural world. These artists use landscape painting to express the majesty, mystery and vastness of the countryside. Ms. Clark, who doubles as a member and Gallery Director, once made a folding screen landscape painting 24 feet wide. “I like the way a folding screen occupies physical space and sometimes mimics the bends and turns of the landscape,” she says. The horizontal format allows the “eye and mind to linger on some elements, and pass lightly over others.”

BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY

¹ Joan Kee and Emanuele Lugli, *To Scale* (Oxford, John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2015)

For some Blue Mountain artists, it is the scale of New York City that inspires awe. Ms. Finnegan's nightscape leads the eye over rooftops to the twinkling skyscrapers beyond. Mr. Mills catches the city skyline through the steel structure of the George Washington Bridge, playing with scale by juxtaposing near and far.

ZOOMING IN

Gulgun Aliriza, Pamela Berkeley and Anne Diggory find that working large gives them more room to zero in on and depict certain details; these particulars would be hard to paint and even harder to see in a small format. By scaling up, Ms. Aliriza says, she gets "lost in the challenge of battling with countless details."

SIZE MATTERS

Sharyn Finnegan and Sam Jungkurth find scale can show ambition. Ms. Finnegan grew up in New York City, just around the corner from the Cedar Tavern, a popular watering hole for Abstract Expressionist painters. Large-scale Ab Ex works came to represent a seriousness of purpose. "As a woman with a family," Ms. Finnegan explains, "I restrained my ambition. When my child left the house, I wanted to give myself to my work completely and scale represented that for me."

BIG FIGURES

Narrative, large-scale figurative works can carry large-scale impact. Many (if not most) of the great masterpieces of western art history are multiple-figure paintings. Alberti wrote about these compositions as "the greatest work of the painter."

Pamela Berkeley, Carol Heft, Joan Marie Kelly, John Leavey and Sam Thurston use figural arrangements to think big.

LARGER THAN LIFE

Richard Castellana, Tim Ross and Rose Weinstock have scaled up by working at, or even beyond, life-size. Ms. Weinstock's full-scale depiction of architectural elements, aims for a trompe l'oeil effect, while Mr. Castellana's larger-than-life portrait uses a scale jump to add force.

SMALLER WORKS, BIG THEMES

A number of Blue Mountain Gallery artists reject the notion that scale can be measured in inches. Mary Lou Alberetti, Douglas Anderson, Ken Ecker, Judith Evans, Owen Gray, Marilyn Honigman, John Leavey, Nancy Prusinowski, Gina Sawin, Linda Smith, Sam Thurston, Marie Van Elder and Jeanie Wing maintain that “thinking big” in art means tackling big subjects, and smaller works can still pack a big punch. As Ms. Evans puts it: “A small Cezanne or Vermeer can knock your socks off just as much as a huge Diego Rivera wall full of figures. There are no rules ... A big painting has a big heart, regardless of its dimensions.”

INNER-SCALE: PROPORTIONS WITHIN THE COMPOSITION

Pamela Boily, Charles Kaiman, Helene K. Manzo, Alakananda Mukerji, Janie Paul, Victoria Salzman, Janet Sawyer and Jennifer Toth are concerned with inner proportions. By fine-tuning their compositions, these artists seek to convey great scale. Ms. Paul’s abstracted oil pastel, “Still Here,” is among the smallest artworks in this exhibit. But Ms. Paul, who has taught art to prison inmates for the last 22 years, has seen the “immensity of imaginative space” flourish in confinement. In her abstracted piece, weighty, red architectural forms dominate most of the page, while a sliver of sky blue runs along the top edge of the composition. This artwork, she explains, deals with “constraints and freedom, limits and possibilities.”

This exhibit was designed to address “the significance of both the physical and psychological impact of an artwork’s size in relation to its thematic concerns,” according to a gallery statement. But even in this much larger venue, with over forty artists, a size limit of 72-inch-width had to be imposed—which just goes to prove: scale is relative.