

Art Review: Gallery Exhibitions of Inka Essenhigh, Michelle Grabner and Russian Avant-Garde Art

Exploring Space and Worlds Near and Far

By Peter Plagens

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Inka Essenhigh's 'Summer Landscape' (2013) at Jacob Lewis. ILLUSTRATION: JACOB LEWIS GALLERY

Inka Essenhigh: Comet Dust & Crystal Shards

Jacob Lewis

521 W. 26th St., (212) 643-6353

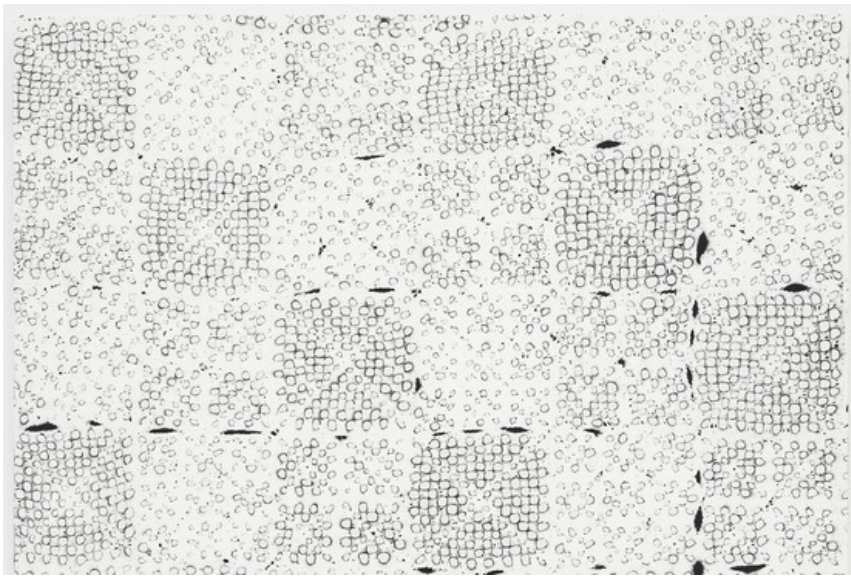
Through Nov. 15

Artists who employ dry, conceptual means tend to elicit the same kind of reaction in viewers. Those who get the idea behind the work love the puzzle-solving, while those who

don't get it feel like they have been forced to take high-school calculus all over again. By contrast, artists who free-associate—particularly dreamily so, as in the case of the painter Inka Essenhigh (b. 1969)—generate freely associative reactions.

This latest exhibition by Ms. Essenhigh makes me, for instance, think of the 19th-century symbolist Odilon Redon (the mysticism, the moonlike faces), coupled with the ornate silhouettes of Kara Walker. Throw in the giant white humanoid who dives into the waterfall in Ridley Scott's sci-fi movie "Prometheus," and you have the ambience.

Ms. Essenhigh has changed her style over the past few years. She used to create rather flat compositions, with enamel paints, and her pictures were about 60% abstract, with moments of figuration popping up out of her paint-handling. These days, she works in oil, depicts a deeper space, and is almost entirely representational—painting benevolent-appearing, chalky-colored fantasy people in Utopian settings. The works in "Comet Dust" are on very large sheets of paper; to be really convincing, that demands a slightly smoother technique than she now employs. But that's a cavil. My overall associative response to the paintings: I like them.



Michelle Grabner's 'Untitled' (2014). ILLUSTRATION: TK

Michelle Grabner

James Cohan

533 W. 26th St., (212) 714-9500

Through Nov. 8

Michelle Grabner is probably best known to New York art lovers as one of the three curators of the recent Whitney Biennial exhibition—and, by critical consensus, as the most successful one. Ms. Grabner (b. 1962) is also—and perhaps unfairly—regarded by many as “the mom artist.” She lives in the nice suburb of Oak Park, Ill., and has three children (two grown, one still at home).

By themselves, those facts shouldn’t burden her with such a designation, but she and this exhibition emphasize the idea. “A Few Minutes with Michelle Grabner,” a five-minute video introduction to the show, depicts the artist baking pies. Two large horizontal displays of art made from interwoven strips of colored paper are the latest in a continuing series originally inspired, she says in the film, by one of her son’s kindergarten projects.

The largest piece in the exhibition—a giant mobile containing a flowerlike configuration of flattened trash-can lids and a child’s table and chair—additionally features a hanging framed photograph of her whole family in a garden. The work is called “My Oyster,” and its point couldn’t be more obvious: Domesticity (represented by the aforementioned flower) generates her art (exemplified by an abstract tondo painting in the middle of the lid-petals).

Though there are more orthodox paintings in the exhibition—elegant, white-ish compositions that resemble attractively worn tile—“My Oyster” and the weavings are the show’s centerpieces. The trouble is that for all the labor, bright color and scale, Ms. Grabner’s variegated aesthetic somehow comes up empty.

In Other Worlds: The Art of the Russian Avant-Garde, 1910-1930

Gallery Shchukin

524 W. 19th St., (212) 929-7222

Through Dec. 31

“Museum-quality” is a term frequently used to describe gallery exhibitions of deceased artists, in which each of the works might be gladly snapped up by some museum, somewhere, if it were available. Not all such shows truly deserve the label, but “In Other

Worlds” does.

Gallery owner Nikolay Shchukin is a descendant of Sergei Shchukin (1854-1936), the brave and pioneering Russian collector of modern art. The collections of Shchukin and his friendly rival, Ivan Morozov, were confiscated by the Soviets, but not destroyed, and ended up in two museums—the Hermitage in St. Petersburg and the Pushkin Museum in Moscow.

The current Mr. Shchukin, a former psychotherapist, and his wife, Marina, opened a modern-art gallery in Moscow in 1987—the waning days of the U.S.S.R., when such art was still considered politically dangerous—and have recently expanded to New York. The art in “In Other Worlds” comes from their personal collection of Russian examples of Fauvism, Cubism, Expressionism, Futurism and, of course, Constructivism.

The works are small by contemporary standards (the show will rotate in some new pictures during its long run), and maybe the only genuine masterpiece on view is a signature abstraction by Kasimir Malevich. But practically everything else in the exhibition, to invoke some boxing expressions, punches above its weight, making “In Other Worlds” a pound-for-pound powerhouse.