

Pat Steir Accepts Time's Passage With Grace

hyperallergic.com/787437/pat-steir-accepts-times-passage-with-grace

John Yau

December 15, 2022



Pat Steir, who is in her mid-80s, had her first New York show in 1964 and has been exhibiting regularly in this city since 1971. Working steadily and prolifically at a high level for nearly 60 years is no small feat. After painting self-portraits in the style of other artists, she made her first compelling body of work, *The Breughel Series (A Vanitas of Style)* (1983–84), which was shown at the Brooklyn Museum and other venues. In this series, comprised of three paintings of different sizes, Steir divided a poster of Jan Breughel the Elder's 17th-

century still life, depicting a vase of flowers and busy insects against a dark ground, into a grid, and interpreted each section in the style of an artist; Jackson Pollock, Arthur Dove, and Georgia O'Keeffe were among the dozens of artists she channeled. In addition to Steir's copy of the original, one painting consisted of 16 monochrome panel, and the other had 64 polychrome panels.

As cool and conceptual as this project was, what became clear was that Steir had a passion for painting and what paint could be made to do. Also apparent was that her subject seemed to be art about art, and in that regard it was formally driven. By picking a subject (self-portraits and still-lives) and making up rules about how to approach these genres, she found ways to challenge herself as well as keep evolving. By 1988, she had moved into an area that she defined and continues to work in, characterized by gestural painting, predetermined constraints, and the merging of mark making and waterfalls.

Steir painted her first black and white waterfall in 1990. She went on to make a group of them, alongside another group in radiant contrasts of red, blue, green, yellow, and orange. In these paintings, her choreographed gestures of vertical drips and horizontal splashes activate the surface and keep the viewer looking. These paintings were graceful, fresh, and light, like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers tripping the light fantastic — the sheer pleasure of making was present to see and sink into. As art about art, this was damned good. But mining the same narrow vein for 40 years can become laborious and predictable, which was why I was apprehensive about seeing *Pat Steir: Blue River and Rainbow Waterfalls*, her debut exhibition at Hauser & Wirth (November 10–December 23, 2022).



Installation view of *Pat Steir: Blue River and Rainbow Waterfalls* at Hauser & Wirth, New York

Other than “Blue River” (2005), which is the largest painting that Steir is likely to make in her lifetime, the eight paintings (all dated 2022) can be divided into two series, *Rainbow Waterfall* and *9 x 7*. In each, she sets up a series of parameters around a wet brushstroke from which rivulets of thinned paint run down the surface. Although the press release never mentions this, Steir’s work of the ’90s was the result of physically demanding processes that require a certainly agility and muscularity. What happens when you cannot do what you once did?

Steir’s acceptance of time passing is one of the strengths of this show. It is why I prefer the *9 x 7* series to the *Rainbow Waterfalls*. In the *Rainbow Waterfalls* paintings, she uses a chalk line to evenly divide the square canvas into three vertical bands, with a horizon line spanning the middle. The monochromatic ground is painted a variety of reds, from red-brown to orange-red. At the top of each band, the artist applied a wide horizontal block of thinned color, which drips unevenly down much of the painting’s length. Steir’s direct process has roots in Jackson Pollock’s poured paintings, Helen Frankenthaler’s and Morris Louis’s stained paintings, Chinese ink painting, and rule-bound Conceptual art.

As a group, these are handsome paintings. In one particularly good work, the dripping pastel palette — pinkish-orange, lemon yellow, and robin’s-egg blue against an orange ground — subverts the domestic coziness we associate with those soft colors.



Pat Steir, “Blue River” (2005), oil on canvas, 135 x 444 3/4 x 2 1/2 inches

While the four paintings in the 9 x 7 series were also done according to a set of rules, something different and more engaging happens that invites close looking. The surface in this series consists of two closely related colors, one of which drips down the canvas and interacts with the other. Just above the center of the painting, Steir stacks horizontal brushstrokes in different colors. Standing close, you can look at the monochromatic ground, its craquelure or dripping surface, or you can focus on the stack of brushstrokes in different viscosities and see how they drip and interact, as some colors are semi-transparent and others opaque.

Years of working with paint have paid off; Steir knows how to get the effect she wants. She can take the paint from watery to melting butter to something as slow and dense as syrup. The craquelure surface evokes erosion, while the rivulets are dissipating roots reaching down. The brushstrokes convey a sense of history as ongoing layers with different sets of roots; they also suggest fraying and unraveling flags.

From the confined placement of the stacked brushstrokes to the craquelure surface to the mossy green and deep blue grounds, these paintings are chronicles of erosion and accumulation — subjects that artists associated with the first- and second-generation Color Field painting did not approach. And yet, one day, the endurance needed to make certain paintings, such as “Blue River,” is no longer possible. How do you make that irrevocable change in your body a part of a painting’s character? In the 9 x 7 paintings, Steir has accomplished this with grace.



Pat Steir, "9 x 7, F" (2022) oil on canvas, 108 x 84 inches

Pat Steir: Blue River and Rainbow Waterfalls continues at Hauser & Wirth (542 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 23. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.