

Art in America

Ugly painting in New York is getting uglier, and that's good news.

September 21, 2023
By Alex Greenberger

This summer, “Ugly Painting,” a group show at New York’s Nahmad Contemporary, seemed to augur the return of a kind of art I’ve yearned for: figuration that utilizes grotesquerie and hideousness as an assault on “good” taste. But **Domenick Ammirati** wrote convincingly that the show, organized by adviser **Eleanor Cayre** and critic **Dean Kissick**, was really “about beauty coyly pretending to be about its obverse.” It left me longing for ugly painting that is actually ugly, but thankfully, two shows in New York deliver on that front.



At Tara Downs, there’s a **standout show** of new paintings by **Catherine Mulligan**, many featuring scantily clad, inhumanly grey, and dangerously emaciated blonde women posing for the viewer. They appear more dead than alive, more disgusting than desirable—even as they conform to the beauty standards of the aughts championed by Paris Hilton. The sense of decay extends to these women’s settings, which resemble abandoned malls straight out of zombie movies, and seep further, wrapping around the frames.

Mulligan’s show is a celebration of déclassé culture, an attack on acceptability. No surprise, then, that the show is called “Bad Girls Club,” a name it shares with a reality TV series known for offering spicy catfights between its female cast members. A painting called *Ass* (2023) greets gallery visitors. It shows a woman using her mottled hands to spread her buttocks and expose her pink thong. The painting urges viewers to get a good eyeful of what’s being revealed, yet the act of looking at *Ass* isn’t exactly enjoyable.

Ugly paintings like Mulligan’s can be traced back to “**Bad’ Painting**,” **Marcia Tucker**’s 1978 New Museum show that championed artists who threw painterly norms to the wind, challenging conventions with everything from the vulgar to the vernacular. The bad and the ugly converge in a show by **Ben Sakoguchi**, a Bay Area octogenarian **now receiving his due** at Ortuzar Projects.

Sakoguchi’s Ortuzar exhibition is full of smallish paintings, many of them paying homage to the illustrations that once appeared on the labels of California orange crates. (Those crates could be readily found in Sakoguchi’s parents’ grocery store when he was younger.) The labels’ bold, poppy style hews closer to bad graphic design than it does gorgeous painting. The compositions are chaotic; the colors are flat. Sakoguchi embraces this look for scenes that protest racism, conservatism, and the pretense that pervades art history as a discipline.

One way Sakoguchi pulls painting down to earth is by representing pop-cultural subjects. Two of them are **Pamela Anderson** or **Dolly Parton**, who appear in one painting above a quotation from the Star-Spangled Banner. As fireworks explode behind her, Parton raises her hand in a salute. In representing her amid such patriotic words, Sakoguchi seems to thank her for her service to this nation. Can you blame him?