

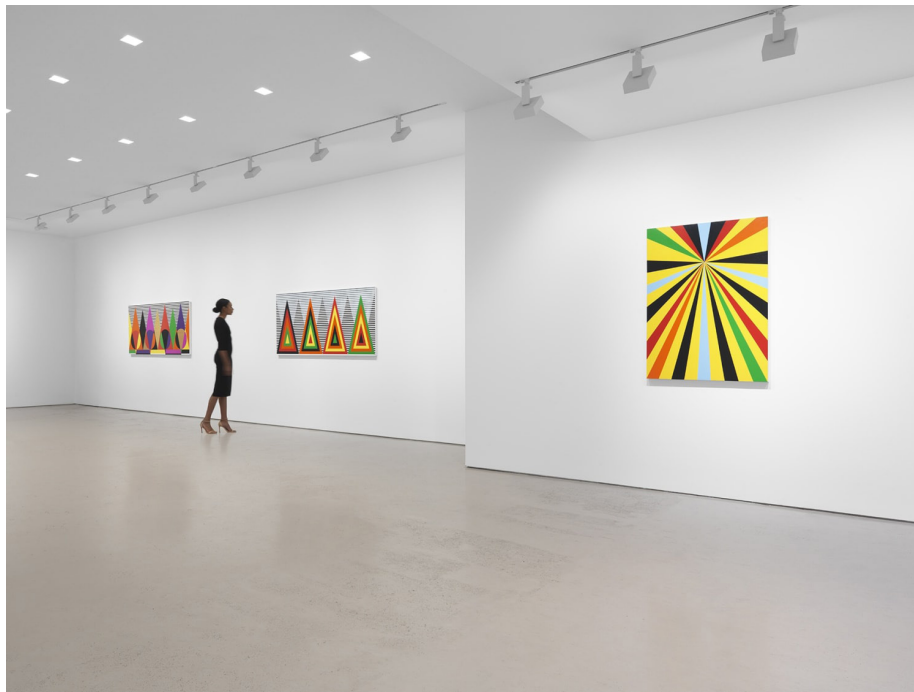
# The New Criterion

## Gallery Chronicle

By James Panero

Art January 2021

On “Sam Gilliam: Existed Existing” at Pace Gallery, New York, “Martin Puryear” at Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, “Jack Whitten: I Am the Object” at Hauser & Wirth, New York & “Rico Gatson: Ghosts” at Miles McEnery Gallery, New York.



Installation view of “Rico Gatson: Ghosts” at Miles McEnery Gallery, New York. Photo: Miles McEnery Gallery.

The experience of art is never more vital than in times of crisis. During the Blitz, Kenneth Clark’s “picture of the month” restored one masterpiece at a time to the walls of the National Gallery. Myra Hess’s lunchtime concerts returned live music to bombed-out London. So far, our best response to World War C has been outdoor dining. We could have been a little more spirited and inventive in our emergency initiatives. Yes, it is true that in today’s New York we can eat our meals in boxes built above the gutter. What we should be seeing are concerts in every park and theater on every corner.

The city’s commercial art galleries have been the exception to this rule. They too could have remained dark, all covered in the finest grades of low-knot plywood. Instead the galleries have returned to become the city’s great free cultural resource at a time when there are far too few alternatives. With timed tickets available in advance or, in

most cases, simply when you walk in, the vitality of art remains a barcode-scan away. As the galleries have restored their cycles of new exhibitions, the experience of gallery-going has become has become salutary. In these times of clandestine gatherings, the shared encounters even feel revolutionary. Just imagine, actually seeing something with someone outside of Zoom. I just hope it lasts until the time of publication.

This season, in Chelsea, the interest of New York's blue-chip galleries has coalesced around a selection of what we might now call black-chip art. In particular, this has meant the exhibition of several simultaneous shows by a generation of black male abstractionists who have each reached new levels of veneration and value. The contemporary art market can be notoriously ill-calibrated, of course, and one could attribute this latest trend to just another passing interest. In this case, however, the attention is well deserved. Before the mega-galleries ever got involved, long before the upheavals of last summer, certain galleries and dealers had been exploring the loose affinities of these artists who use the language of abstraction in new and profound ways.

-

At Miles McEnery Gallery, a captivating exhibition by Rico Gatson revealed the power of pure abstraction to impure effect. A generation younger than the black abstractionists on view elsewhere in Chelsea, Gatson has been even more forthright in exploring the confluences of color in his work. In "Icons," a series on paper that he began in 2007, Gatson uses radiating lines to depict the power of black figures, images of whom he has affixed to the work. The series has a sonic quality that is all horn, a tone well represented in a recent retrospective at The Studio Museum in Harlem. In the latest exhibition, Miles McEnery Gallery presented a selection of them. More are now on permanent display as art-in-transit mosaics in the 167th Street subway station.

In his abstractions, Gatson has tended to work with pan-African patterns and colors. The merging of modernism and Africanism is one that groundbreaking artists such as Aaron Douglas pioneered a century ago. Of course, one may even say that modernism itself represents a confluence of African and European artistic traditions.

Through his new abstractions at Miles McEnery, Gatson seemed freer than before in going his own way, unencumbered by particular references to time and place. His geometric arrangements of circles, lines, and triangles were like radiant peaks atop mystical mountains. The graphic excitement of his earlier work is still here, just now made personal. After fifteen years of depicting famous icons, this time the iconography is his own.