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Leidy Churchman, The Meal of the Lion
Murray Guy
by Roberta Smith



Ferocity: Leidy Churchman's "19th Century Flayed Elephant," at Murray Guy.

Leidy Churchman's art comprises a range of mediums: painting, video, sculpture and installation. But painting and its infinite mutability are his main interest in this expansive solo show, his second at a New York gallery. Here, 19 canvases explore some of the subjects, styles, moods and meanings encompassed by representation, abstraction included. Materials and process receive acute attention. Most images evolved in some way from existing art, advertising or cartography, but personal imagination registers everywhere.

Especially prominent is "Rousseau," a reprise of Henri Rousseau's "The Repast of the Lion," which shows a lion savaging its prey in an otherwise peaceable jungle kingdom. Mr. Churchman changes Rousseau's big blue flowers to impassioned hot pink, emphasizing the rambunctious nature of youthful ambition in the china shop of civilization.

This appetite prevails throughout the show, restrained but restless and relentless. "Tallest Residential Tower in the Western Hemisphere" shows an elegant bathtub, tinged pink by the sunset, overlooking a darker, folksier rendering of Manhattan, contrasting real estate (and painterly) class with relative mass. In the mostly red-and-white "19th Century Flayed Elephant," a Tibetan weaving of an elephant with the claws and stripes of a tiger masquerades as a painting that is flat and ferocious. In "Pelagic Ocean Sunfish," two very different, mutually suspicious sea creatures evoke a famous photograph of Earth taken from the moon, equating the ocean's mysteries with those of outer space.

Other paintings take us up in the air with Alexander Calder, and down to sea level with a raw-looking linen canvas disguised as tarmac with smears of thin black paint. There's also a giraffe camouflaged by moody modernist stripes, a tribute to Jacob Lawrence's tribute to black infantrymen, and a portrait of Martha, the last known passenger pigeon. Finally, in "Freud!," Mr. Churchman exposes something of his dream life, depicting an open door, an open book and a bed with two pillows. Perhaps some painters contain multitudes.