

Karen Carson,
Butterfly, 2018, acrylic
on bas-relief wood,
21½ × 32½ × 3".



tableaux are in line with those made by certain forebears, such as Wassily Kandinsky, Hilma af Klint, and Agnes Pelton: painters whose nonobjective imagery embraced the multivalent aspects of the infinite, the spiritual.

Contrasting with these pieces was a selection of Carson's iconic series of zipper paintings (clearly a winking homage to Barnett Newman's famous "zips"), which she debuted at her 1971 graduate exhibition at the University of California, Los Angeles. The large unstretched canvases on display here—made from overlapping and contiguous panels, either left raw or painted red, black, and white—were held together by zippers. Viewers were invited to interact with them, zipping and unzipping to their heart's content. Pieces such as *Two Right Angles*, 1972—an upright rectangle made from L-shaped lengths of canvas painted a rich shade of onyx—drooped off the wall and sometimes languorously flopped onto the floor. The work, though formally rigorous and ingeniously conceived, is also unabashedly open and playful. Carson eschews Minimalism's aesthetic cool and standoffishness for something more inviting, gentle, even puckish. *Two Right Angles* could be a funner sibling to one of Frank Stella's "Black Paintings," 1958–60. Stella's dark bars in his series are punishing, prisonlike. Carson's, thankfully, are the exact opposite—they are spirited, inviting.

Throughout "Middle Ground" we were treated to Carson's unique takes on Minimalism and various forms of abstraction. Though her work is entirely singular, it is rooted in art history. She speaks to the past as her works speak to us: generously and with great feeling.

—Jake Yuzna

Lauren Satlowski

BEL AMI

In her solo exhibition at Bel Ami, "Watch the Bouncing Ball," which spanned the holidays and stretched into the new year, Lauren Satlowski turned a studied eye onto the trinkets and textures of our time, rendering glossy surfaces and glowing gradients with scrupulous, sumptuous glee. The ten oil paintings featured still-life arrangements of dolls, decals, and other bric-a-brac that hover atop creamy, incandescent grounds. Like the Photorealists before her—who took pleasure in replicating, for instance, a Chrysler Sebring's scintillating silver paint or a chrome napkin dispenser's glint—Satlowski chooses certain objects for their consumerist sparkle, foregrounding the aspirant cuteness of disposable commodities and recording the eerie decay of fabricated cheer. The modestly scaled canvas *Lily Vase with Faces* (all works 2020)

fixates on a small bulging Ziploc bag filled with water and three lily blossoms that rests atop a length of velvety black and leans against a peach-colored wall. Several stickers, printed with sock-and-buskin masks and covered in twinkling rhinestones, have been affixed to the bag's skin. The artist relishes the Ziploc's plasticky shine and aqueous bloat—its corpulent body, caught in its own sandwich-size tragicomedy, strains to remain upright and not buckle at the sides. Nearby, two other works focused on the glass slabs of a "block" picture frame, designed to float snapshot-size photographs. Satlowski carefully renders its turquoise-tinted panes; translucent shadows and flecks of rainbows stretch across their silver-gray surroundings. In *Help*, a small window decal emblazoned with the titular word is trapped between two pieces of glass and surrounded by tiny water droplets and misty condensation. In *Me Worry*, an iron-on patch embroidered with a small figure leaning on a large bottle of moonshine has been inserted into the frame. The character is blind drunk, grinning with both eyes closed and tongue sticking out. The phrase ME WORRY? is stitched below in capital letters, its insouciance subtly made grave.

The Photorealists' preoccupation with polished metallic surfaces was widely read as a symptom of the twentieth century's new, post-industrial economy, "reflecting," as art historian Dieter Roelstraete writes, "the triumph, incarnated by the glass-sheet office tower, of the service industries" over manufacturing. (Coal and raw steel, come to think of it, are as matte as a painting by Kazimir Malevich.) Satlowski's persistent interest in limpid textures and knickknacks makes one think of the handheld piece of glassy tech in virtually everyone's pocket, that portal into the province of jewellike icons and bijou buttons. Yet unlike her painterly predecessors, who situated their chosen subjects—a suburban driveway, a classic American diner—firmly within the world, the artist strips hers of context, often placing them in silky, ambiguous spaces of pure color and light.

In Satlowski's other canvases on view, humanoid subjects became faceless and estranged, floating in realms that feel almost virtual. *Strings and Horns* depicts a pair of twinned figures—based on an unclothed porcelain doll that the artist leaned against a mirror—hovering in a sky-blue void. Their backs are turned to the viewer, and the thick supple folds of their pale, puffy bodies ripple like fondant, while their metallic heads are lit by a warm buttercream glow, seemingly light-years away, that radiates from the center of the picture. Though you wouldn't know it, *Bad Santa* was painted from a holographic sticker, an already spectral portrayal of Saint Nick that the artist made even more ghostly. He stands at the edge of a dark-brown abyss with arms outstretched, practically begging glad tidings; his rotund body is smooth and boiled down, like a Bitmoji, and partially bathed in electric-green and yellow light. His face and right arm remain shrouded in darkness, as if he is being pulled back to the underworld—a Father Christmas condemned to his own Orphean tragedy, wanting to become real.

—Juliana Halpert

Lauren Satlowski,
Strings and Horns,
2020, oil on linen,
40 × 26".

