

ARTFORUM



Donna Chung, *Untitled (plywood)*, 2021, plywood, 12 × 9".

“Looking Back: The 12th White Columns Annual”

WHITE COLUMNS

THE WHITE COLUMNS ANNUAL is a local thing, a super-subjective précis of the previous year curated by an interesting person or group. It risks, by virtue of its premise, the appearance of an insider-y take on the New York scene, but the context of its host institution—the city’s oldest surviving alternative space, whose eclectic programming is indifferent to the market and the mainstream—and the open sensibilities of those tapped to organize the show reliably save “Looking Back” from that fate. Initiated by White Columns director Matthew Higgs in 2006, it returns after a four-year pause; this time, the twelfth, was put together by artist Mary Manning. “As the global pandemic raged on . . . I

felt that I was still working with confusion and some heartbreak,” they write, reflecting on the process of making selections. “The experience of getting to go look at art with a purpose of sorts had a different, more joyful register.”

With just one work (occasionally two) from each of the forty-five participating artists and no explanatory text, the exhibition courts a certain inscrutability, which comes off as personably idiosyncratic, not cold. The mostly small-scale objects—the majority are from the 2020s; many are abstract—often seem more like souvenirs or synecdoches than like representative pieces from their original knockout

shows. Deana Lawson's understated column of waterfall snapshots (*Waterfall Assemblage*, 2020), installed in a corner with pins, summons memories of its more famous companions from her 2021 Guggenheim exhibition: her larger-than-life portraits of Black diasporic subjects, photos that, with their holographic insets and mirrored frames, depict a breathtaking, hybrid domestic-seraphic realm. Similarly, Nour Mobarak's white, membranous or asteroidal plastic bas-relief *Hemispheres*, 2020, is a whispering presence, almost hidden high up on a wall. I couldn't place it at first, but I remembered when I searched the checklist for the artist's name: Mobarak worked to less subtle, more colorful effect with saprophytic mycelia (a fungus that prefers dead matter) in her unforgettable New York solo debut at Miguel Abreu last spring.

Sometimes, side by side on a wall, shapes rhyme—as do the spiky silhouette, which looks like a comic-book kapow, in Donna Chung's jigsaw wall piece *Untitled (plywood)*, 2021, and the stiff fiber mane of the painted papier-mâché lion's head worn by an office worker in an image by Gauri Gill. (For her series "Acts of Appearance," 2015–, the photographer collaborates with mask makers in rural Maharashtra to stage lush, absurd vignettes.) Nan Goldin's half-in-shadow portrait of Thora Siemsen, *Thora at home, Brooklyn, NY*, 2020, with its vertical panels and tonal warmth, echoes the shaded-umber-and-sunset-gold rectangle of Monique Mouton's undated painting *Soft Wait*.

But Manning's keen, almost decorative curatorial approach isn't the show's only glue. The biggest piece here, with its appealing directness and intermittent audio, becomes an ambient, thematizing force. *The Disco Project Installation*, 2021–22, a multiscreen work by dancer-choreographer Neil Greenberg, comprises video documentation of the cathartically elegiac performance it was named for, which premiered at New York's P.S. 122 (now Performance Space New York) in 1995. In it, dancers wearing hot-pink satin shorts and sleeveless tops superbly confuse the vernacular of postmodern concert dance and the libidinal abandon of the club as stretches of silence alternate with pop songs and a projected first-person-text narrates Greenberg's life. At one point, the sentence MY BROTHER AND EIGHT OTHER FRIENDS DIED OF AIDS counterpoints Sylvester's euphoric and heartrending "Do Ya Wanna Funk?" falsetto. For gallery presentations, Greenberg adds another

layer of commentary on a smaller screen, considering both his ambivalence about reframing this material as art and its bearing on the present. THIS IS NOT MY FIRST PAN-DEMIC, his video metatext notes.

His installation's first iteration was shown at the gallery Greene Naftali in February 2021 in a starker setting (the group show "From Disco to Disco"), where a line of Jacqueline Humphries's untitled black-light paintings from 2019 kept it company in the dark. Manning picked one to show here too: a compact gestural abstraction in which neon pink glows beneath purple brushstrokes. Other inclusions allude more or less obliquely to issues of performance, dance, and going out. Kandis Williams's *Notes for Stage, Cult, and Popular Entertainment* according to place, person, genre, speech, music, and dance, 2021—which appeared in her multimedia solo exhibition "A Line" (52 Walker's momentous inaugural show)—uses photocollage as a kind of etiological dance notation. Unraveling the racial history of styles and schools of movement through cut-and-paste transposition, the artist reveals the extractive practices of white modernism and mass media vis-à-vis Black cultural traditions and forms. And works like the black-and-white portrait *Au Monocle, Jeune Invertie*, ca. 1932, shot at a lesbian nightclub by Brassai, and *Barry (144 Polaroids)*, 1993–96, a photo grid by artist-designer-performer Frederick Weston, which indexes outfits and personae as modeled by young men at his Chelsea SRO, are reminders of the self-expression (or anonymity) that nightlife affords and of the cultural stakes of the Covid-19 shutdown for queer communities.

In "Looking Back," Manning's response to what could have been a dismaying subject—the not-quite-back-to-normal art world of 2021—left me somehow relieved. The show seemed to credibly propose that it was a good year for small things, for perceiving and adjusting to, but not making decisive claims about, our particular catastrophic-embryonic state.

- Johanna Fateman