

CRISTIN TIERNEY

BROOKLYN RAIL

Joe Fig: *Contemplating Compositions*

By Barbara A. MacAdam
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Joe Fig, *Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Pulse Topology/Pace*, 2022. Oil on linen mounted on MDF board, 16 x 22 inches. Courtesy the artist and Cristin Tierney.

Why appropriation? Joe Fig extends his exploration of the practice into and out of the realm of novelty. Here, he delves into the experience of the landscape of an artwork—its dimensions, positions, neighbors, and responses to light and to us, its inhabitants. And he does all of this while bringing us face to face almost deadpan with the work itself. Is he describing or demystifying?

While replicating a piece of art to the best of his ability, Fig also depicts the environment of its display and reception, adding audience response, inclusion, and participation in the work. He shows how people see it and posture before it, as well as how that plays into the

CRISTIN TIERNEY

configuration of the whole. Fig also adds shadows to the mix—those engendered by the viewers and by the shape of the edges of a canvas. How does the audience feel when it sees an art object? What does the body language of a viewer say? How do they take possession of the work? And do they really?

So Fig's subject is more than the work in question. It is, he has said, the contemplation of a work of art, with his main concern being: how do we stand in relation to the work and how do the artists themselves perceive their creation, as we watch them literally observing it, standing in its reflection outside of it and in it, moving back and forth?



Joe Fig, Alex Katz: *Gathering/Guggenheim (The Great Katzby)*, 2022–23. Oil on linen mounted on MDF board, 19 x 21 inches. Courtesy the artist and Cristin Tierney.

It's not so much appropriation even though part of each "original" work partakes of it. Unlike the inexact appropriationist Elaine Sturtevant, who saw "repetition as difference," Fig describes repetition with a purpose. He, in effect, speaks to his audience, allowing for their independent appraisals. He seems to differ most from contemporaries such as Andy Warhol and Mike Bidlo, who argue against originality and authenticity, by recontextualizing his quoted sources.

Consider the seductive *Joan Mitchell: Wood, Wind, No Tuba/Zwirner* (2023), with its bright yellow-orange reflection on the floor, captured first in the painting, and then as real shadows on the gallery floor and the two viewers who stand on it, in effect laying claim to the work. Getting the colors "right" was difficult, according to Fig. The light and its changes alter the colors in the reflection. An electrifying rendition of the Mitchell painting, the floor

CRISTIN TIERNEY

image further implicates the viewers into the painting. An essentially new work of art is created, one that could rightly be signed by Fig.

Among the most intriguing of Fig's paintings, although not included in this show, is *Peter Saul: Fake News/Mary Boone* (2018–22), in which tricks abound as we try to gain a sense of place and perspective. A group of figures shown hip-down gathers to apparently ponder two abstract paintings by Saul. The works themselves are barely decipherable, but the reflection on the floor of the observers and the paintings tell a very different story. Perspective lines on the floor make us think of Richard Diebenkorn. The fine lines in the appropriated painting lead into the gallery space with its bumpy, shiny floor standing in for Diebenkorn's geometric Bay Area landscape. Are we indoors or out, we wonder.



Joe Fig, *Wangechi Mutu: People in Glass Towers Should Not Imagine Us/New Museum*, 2023. Oil on linen mounted on MDF board, 15 1/2 x 18 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Cristin Tierney.

Space assumes two-dimensionality in the vast studio universe of *Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Pulse Topology/Pace* (2022), sharing with us the night sky and the rhythm of its twinkling stars. Capturing a public light installation, Fig presents characters in the darkness of the created world, seeming befuddled and lost in both real and imagined space. In a more straightforward take on a gathering, *Wangechi Mutu: People in Glass Towers Should Not Imagine Us/New Museum*, (2022) homes in on the portrayal of a group of socially disconnected figures, united only in their shared moment before an artwork.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Another compelling group treatments take place in the Guggenheim Museum: *Alex Katz: Gathering/Guggenheim (The Great Katzby) (2022–23)*. Accompanied by Guggenheim visitors, the Katz images together with audiences circumnavigating the rotunda are a charming tour de force. Fig continues to explore the way we view art from inside and out focusing on the many landscapes of presentation and how they help to show us our place and standing in the art world of today—our time.