

cynthia byrnes
contemporary art

BEAUTY / DESTRUCTION

Claudia Mengel + Paul Michael Graves

Thursday, May 19, 6 - 8pm

508 W 26th Street, #12A / PH, New York, NY 10001



This exhibition is curated by Tessa Rosenstein, CBCA Exhibitions Manager

EXHIBITION HOURS

Thursday, May 19, 6 - 8 pm

Friday, May 20 - Saturday, May 21, 12 - 6pm

Sunday, May 22, 12 - 4pm

Beauty / Destruction

Cynthia Byrnes Contemporary Art is proud to present *Beauty / Destruction*, a pop-up exhibition featuring the work of Claudia Mengel and Paul Michael Graves. Through a series of discussions both artists collaborated on their thoughts and feelings around the concepts of 'beauty' and 'destruction' before returning to their individual studios to create work influenced by their discourse.

The concept of beauty is the common ground on which Mengel and Graves began their journey by exploring their own ideas of what beauty is. Through their collaborations, both artists considered destruction not as a natural opposite to beauty but as an opposing, even grounding, force to beauty. While the logical opposite of 'beauty' is 'ugliness,' both artists were intrigued by the interaction between the two disparate concepts. Sidestepping a literal interpretation, Mengel and Graves each entertained broader applications of destruction, particularly the effect of incorporating destructive elements into something beautiful.

In her new body of work, Claudia Mengel expresses these themes through color and tension. Using broad, loose strokes of pastel and acrylic, Mengel sows vibrant color across the paper, like a garden bursting with life. Her interpretation of destruction comes in the form of graphic black marks made with ink that slice through and tangle with these abstract technicolor shapes. While such marks fail to destroy the composition in any literal capacity, they create a sophisticated tension, drawing the eye across the page and punctuating the energy of the rich colors with the stillness of the exposed paper.

A major influence on Mengel's work for this show is the experience of watching her neighbor's abandoned garden slowly fall into disrepair and disorder. She recalls becoming captivated by watching through her window as the once tidy plot of land gradually disintegrated into natural chaos. Nature's eventual reclaiming of the space prompted Mengel's exploration of the point of collision between beauty, in both its constructed and organic forms, and destruction as the decay of something in one form and the creation of space and an opportunity for something else. This attention to growth, decay, and regrowth is evident in the implied energy behind her gestural marks.

For his new body of work, Paul Michael Graves created a series of large grayscale paintings melding together the broad geomatic language from his technobabble series and the fine, creeping linework of his rhizome series. These compositions give the immediate impression of being governed by complex mathematic formulas, however upon closer inspection reveal an organic dissemination of line and shapes across the canvas in a language of the artist's own creation. Working free-hand, Graves creates complexly contrasting textures ranging from the smooth expanse of the gray foreground, to the frenetic dashes of straightedge-applied color within the broader geometric shapes, to the fine, sketchy rhizomic linework. Deploying color sparingly under semi-translucent layers of gray, Graves expresses a more restrained beauty through this playful exploration of contrasts. He achieves this through a painstaking process of layering his distinct geometric 'fonts' by building, covering, and revealing different stages of the composition to reach the final iteration. This layering process is, in part, Graves's expression of destruction.

Influenced by his backgrounds in architecture and the military and inspired by the fractal patterns of broken glass or the spread of a blast radius, a technical, industrial quality shines through each piece. His precise linework extends out across the canvas like cracks emanating from an epicenter. In both process and composition Graves conveys an organized, manmade destructive effort rather than the boisterous organic quality of Mengel's works on paper.

Viewing Mengel's and Graves's work side by side we enjoy a feast of juxtapositions. Both artists approach their shared themes from similar starting points, each with a focus on color and a slant interpretation of destruction. Where Mengel's works is wild and exuberant, balancing provocative, gutsy colors with the tension of graphic slashes, Graves's work is cool and organized, reigning in color to the extreme and inculcating viewers in tidy, intuitive patterns. Where Mengel embraces natural chaos, Graves implements constructed order. In viewing their work together, we get to enjoy distinct expressions of the influence of destruction over beauty. Together, their work achieves a similar effect in and of itself by balancing vivaciousness with tension and grounding vibrancy with restraint.

Tessa Rosenstein
Exhibition Manager, CBCA
May 2022

Price List

Beauty / Destruction

May 19 – May 22, 2022

508 W 26th Street, #12A / PH,
New York, NY 10001



Paul Michael Graves, *Fig. LXXVII*, 2022, oil on canvas, 120 h x 96 w in.

\$32,000



Claudia Mengel, *Johnson Vermont I*, 2022, acrylic on paper, 55 h x 65 w in

\$9,000



Claudia Mengel, *Summer Vacation*, 2022, tissue paper, oil stick, mixed media on paper, 55 h x 65 w in

\$9,000



Paul Michael Graves, *Fig. LXXIX*, 2022, oil on canvas, 62 h x 42 w in.

\$7,000



Paul Michael Graves, *Fig. LXXVIII*, 2022, oil on canvas, 62 h x 42 w in.

\$7,000



Paul Michael Graves, *Fig. LXXX*, 2022, oil on canvas, 62 h x 42 w in.

\$7,000



Claudia Mengel, *Make Believe I*, 2022, pastel, ink on paper, 41 h x 29 ½ w in.

\$1,700



Claudia Mengel, *Millers Pond I*, 2022, pastel, ink on paper, 41 h x 29 ½ w in.

\$1,700



Claudia Mengel, *Millers Pon II*, 2022, pastel, ink on paper, 41 h x 29 ½ w in.

\$1,700



Claudia Mengel, *Make Believe II*, 2022, pastel, ink on paper, 41 h x 29 ½ w in.

\$1,700



Claudia Mengel, *Indulgence I*, 2022, ink, pastel monotype, 41 h x 29 ½ w in.

\$1,700



Claudia Mengel, *Indulgence II*, 2022, ink, pastel monotype, 41 h x 29 ½ w in.

\$1,700

Artist Bios

Claudia Mengel

b. 1954, New York

Claudia Mengel's work comes not from direct observation, but by experiencing the world around her as she translates visual and emotional perceptions. With every creation, there is a new discovery, a new problem, and new solution. Working across multiple media from printing, to painting, to mixed media, Mengel produces wildly expressive, vibrant abstract compositions and atmospheric landscapes. Each time she approaches the blank space of paper or canvas, she embarks on a unique journey that is always unlike the last, and never like the next.

Paul Michael Graves

b. 1976, California

Paul Michael Graves began his art practice as an abstract oil painter while serving in the US Air Force as an officer and helicopter pilot flying and commanding special operations missions. Later, while studying architecture at Columbia University, Paul received formal training to channel his artistic voice and analytical strength into artistic expression.

His 'technobabble' linework derives from his left-brained backgrounds of mathematics, aviation, and architecture. He plays with pattern, repetition, and basic geometry to represent an abstract diagrammatic language. His paintings quote graffiti and pop art of the 1980's while commenting on technology's ever-increasing influence on contemporary culture. Paul's art resembles circuitry, machines, maps, or formulas, inviting the viewer into an endless world of algorithm.

Claudia Mengel: An Overview

Landscape Poetry is the best way to describe the large abstract art of Claudia Mengel. Her colorful, fluid paintings have a certain rhythm and harmony that evokes an experience very much like reading a poem. Emotions become stirred, the pleasure centers of our brain are activated, and the visual experience can transport to a meadow or an island beach or simply to the garden in your backyard.

“My work comes from not looking, but experiencing, the world around me, and then translating these visual and emotional perceptions,” states Mengel. “With every creation, there is a new discovery, a new problem, a new solution. Every time I approach the blank white space, I take a journey always unlike the last, and never like the next. It is what keeps me coming back.”

Having done several residencies, her work is captivated by the view of nature outside her studio windows. The work reflects the beauty of the countryside in its purity, and the complexity of feeling and thought the landscape provokes. The work is about a sense of place, of being in awe of nature, and the unique feeling of passing through an experience in a heightened consciousness. There is a reverence for the majesty of nature and the spiritual connection one has with it, leaving open the viewer's ability to interpret its meaning for themselves. The essence of it is that we feel something when viewing Claudia's captivating, poetic landscapes.

Claudia has always been fascinated with landscape painting and the pushing of its boundaries as an artist. The paintings deal strongly with color and painterly vigor that reflect her many years of experience as an artist, including her own view of the world, which, of course, has been molded by her life's reflections. Claudia captures a complexity of feeling and thought through her expression of color and form.

The work of Claudia Mengel is poetry in painting for the viewer to feel and interpret for themselves.

Tracey Brittis
Author
May 2022

The Paintings of Paul Michael Graves

I have known Paul Michael Graves for some years, ever since he participated in my last Columbia Graduate School of Architecture Studio around 2014. It was the custom in our studio to dine together at Esperanto restaurant on the corner of 9th Street and Ave C. The young man from France who owned the restaurant at the time thought the name: Esperanto, will reflect Alphabet City. Here one could recall the Utopian invention of Dr. Ludwik Zamenhof in Vienna, an optician who believed that a common world language “Esperanto” could prevent future wars. He overlooked the obvious fact that some of the worst wars take place between people who indeed speak the same language.

One meaningless gesture produces another with the presumption of meaning. Perhaps meaning has no further depth, but an endless accumulation of meaning- lessness. Yes, by now Paul Michael Graves paints rectangular canvases full of large dots. Early in the 20th century Stéphane Mallarmé wrote: *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (A Throw of the dice can never abolish Chance). On the phonic level, the word: “hasard” brings to mind “basar”, the market where no doubt the ideas of chance and probabilities were born. In this poem, words were distributed on the page just as the large dots are distributed on these canvases. Indeed, in Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet’s film version: *Toute révolution est un coup de dés*, they have replaced the words with actors who are sitting on the hill. Marcel Broodthaers, in his printed version, replaced the words with black bars distributed exactly as the words and their relative size would have been to the written words.

Here, in Paul Michael Graves’ paintings, the constellations of words are the constellations of large dots which create the rhythms and the rhymes of our lives. No less puzzling than words, these relatively large dots challenge our habits. Originally found in punch cards, as a calculating device they are a shortcut to a logic superior to our norms. But is this the association we would like to cultivate?

On our horizon these configurations belong to what Manfredo Tafuri called “Sublime Uselessness”, in his *Architecture and Utopia* (1973), borrowing a phrase from Thomas Mann (Tonio Kröger). He of course meant it not as a compliment, but to re-frame Aldo Rossi’s formal efforts in such a way as to bring out the Utopian, and hence ambivalent character of his work. As for Tafuri, all utopias

were destined to fail, even if the brilliant use of the ephemeral architecture such as the Teatro del Mondo, in Rossi's case, allowed it to act as an allegory or signifier of the one city that comes closest to being a realized utopia--Venice itself.

But I would introduce the term entirely in a positive light. Not unlike the New York Sublime of Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still and Jules Olitski in the sixties of the last century, these configurations, these compositions do address the mind only, the mind in its confrontation with the abysmal prospect of a pandemic world that could find itself locked in the unknown, and the unknowable for at least a hundred years to come.

Could one painter, alone, address himself to such a large unknown, and unknowable? Yes. I think the painter is the most qualified member of our society to address not only the unknown but the unknowable. I think the introduction of these compositions in which much depends on the distribution of relatively small/large points, make them vehicles of exploration. As Oscar Wilde said there is never too much form," It takes a great deal of courage to see the world in all its tainted glory, and still love it."

Yehuda Emmanuel Safran
Art and Architecture Critic
March 2022



Fig. LXXVII
Paul Michel Graves
oil on canvas, 2022
120 h x 96 w in.



Johnson Vermont I
Claudia Mengel
2022, acrylic on paper
55 h x 65 w in.



Summer Vacation
Claudia Mengel
2022, tissue paper, oil stick, mixed media on paper
55 h x 65 w in.



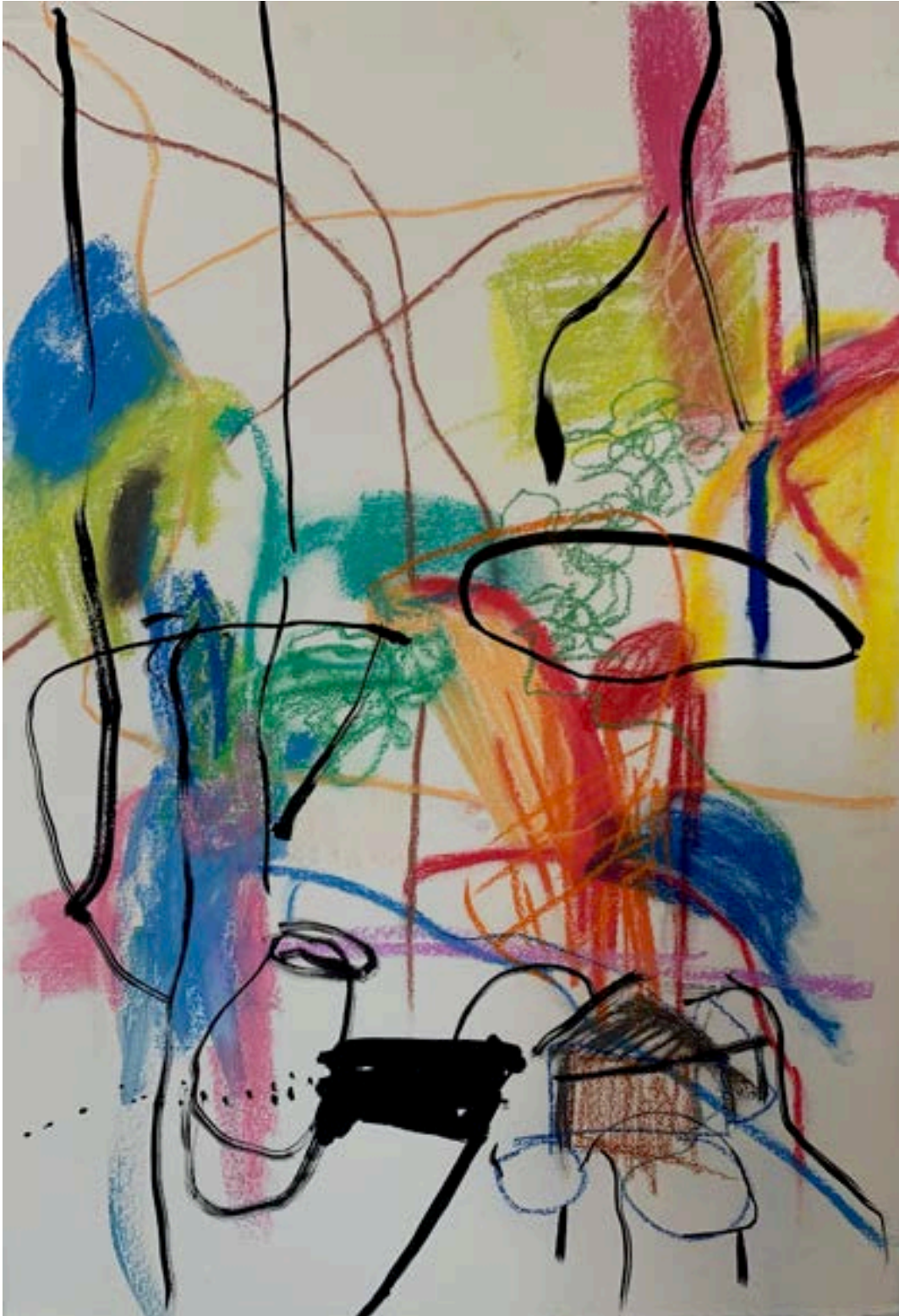
Fig. LXXIX
Paul Michael Graves
2022, oil on canvas
62 h x 42 w in.



Fig. LXXVIII
Paul Michael Graves
2022, oil on canvas
62 h x 42 w in.



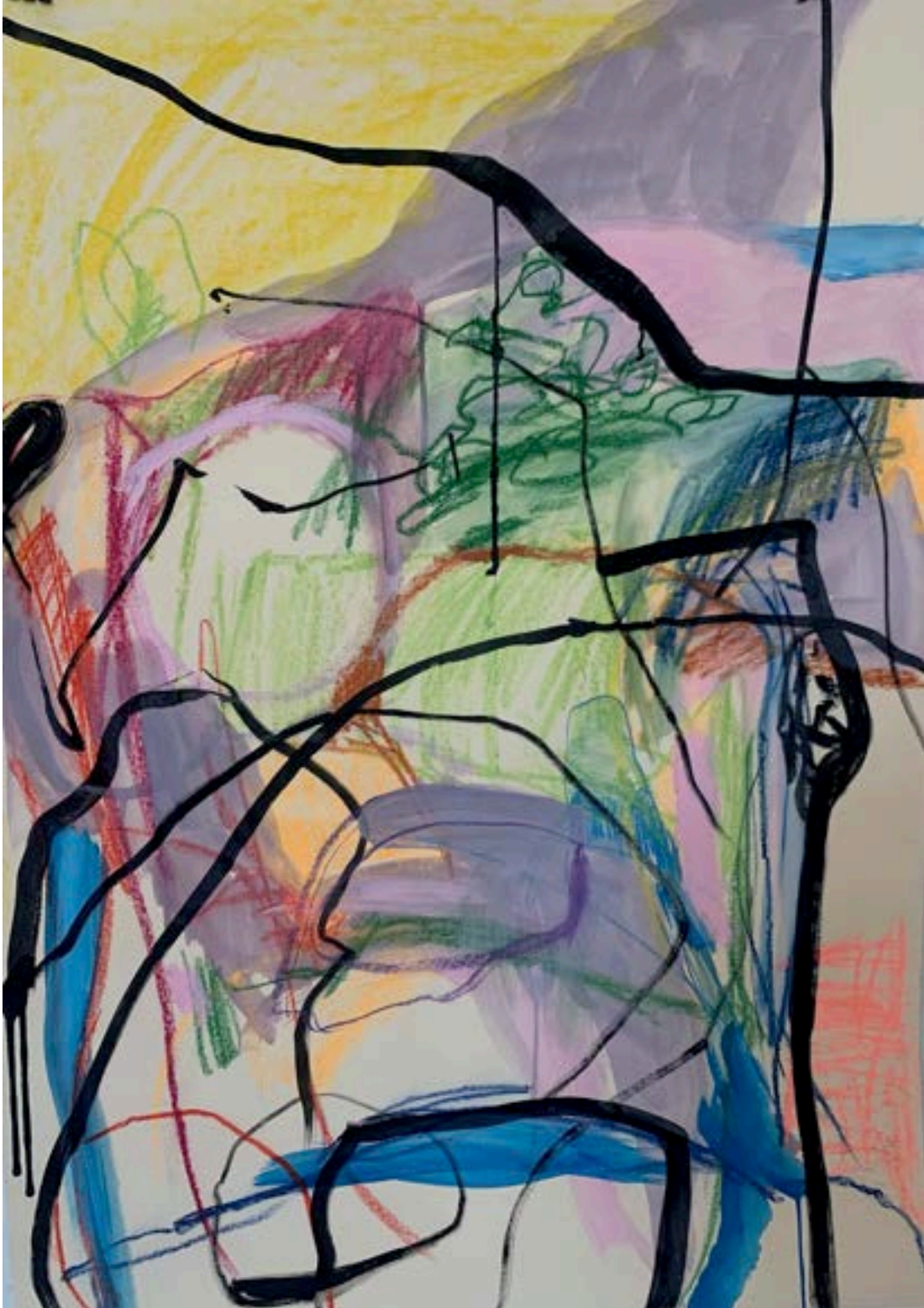
Fig. LXXX
Paul Michael Graves
2022, oil on canvas
62 h x 42 w in.



Make Believe I
Claudia Mengel
2022, pastel, ink on paper
41 h x 29 ½ w in.



Millers Pond I
Claudia Mengel
2022, pastel, ink on paper
41 h x 29 ½ w in.



Millers Pond II
Claudia Mengel
2022, pastel, ink on paper
41 h x 29 ½ w in.



Make Believe II
Claudia Mengel
2022, pastel, ink on paper
41 h x 29 ½ w in.



Indulgence II
Claudia Mengel
2022, ink, pastel monotype
41 h x 29 ½ w in.



Indulgence I
Claudia Mengel
2022, ink, pastel monotype
41 h x 29 ½ w in.

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