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TABBOO! PAINTS A VALENTINE TO NEW YORK CITY

by Roberta Smith



"Big Pink and Purple Cityscape" by Tabboo! (2021) at Karma Gallery in Manhattan. New York is the shining, chimeric star of his joint exhibition at Karma and Gordon Robichaux. Tabboo!, Karma, and Gordon Robichaux

A show in two downtown galleries surveys the Covid cityscapes of this multitalented artist, who has become one of the town's best painters.

"Stop flitting around the house and take off that ridiculous outfit." These words, the artist Stephen Tashjian says, were often directed his way in the Armenian American household of his childhood in Leicester, Mass., when he was already a young professional puppeteer as well as a busy multitasker. They were prophetic because in the early 1980s, fresh from art school in Boston, Tashjian would land in New York and within days begin his rise to fame — in costume — as a drag performance artist on the East Village art scene, at the Pyramid Club and other establishments of gay downtown.

He quickly assumed the stage name of Tabboo! and also busied himself establishing the graphic style of the period with a multitude of grittily elegant posters, announcements and fliers for events at Pyramid and elsewhere. Their lavish curlicue lettering echoed, robustly, that of Warhol's advertising work of the 1950s; their style often evoked German Expressionism by way of underground comics.

He remained Tabboo!, even as he gave up performance and moved deeper and deeper into painting, which is where we find him now, at 63, in a sizable show of recent cityscapes spread through two galleries, Gordon Robichaux in Union Square and Karma on East Second Street.

Tabboo! has always painted what is within reach, including himself and his friends, in and out of drag, still lifes of the flowers, plants and tchotchkes that enliven his apartment on Avenue C and finally New York City itself, the shining, chimeric star of these shows, collectively titled “Tabboo! Cityscapes.” These canvases are portraits of the city, seen up close and from afar, in sunshine, dusk and blackout, in all kinds of weather, including showers of big wet snowflakes — and also in varied painting styles.

A few of the 34 paintings in the shows date back to the 1990s, and tend to be more tentative; the great majority were made in 2020 or 2021, during the on-again-off-again siege of Covid. Tabboo!, like many others, was often housebound, and worked from photographs, imagination and memory, but also from the available views out his fifth-floor apartment, which — with occasional neck-craning — has vistas in all directions.

In these works, his confident, offhand paint handling mutates back and forth between two styles. One is the softened, brightened Ashcan realism like that of “101 Ave A NYC,” a portrait of the now-defunct Pyramid Club at Karma, or “The View From GR,” at Gordon Robichaux (the GR of the title). This second canvas hangs next to the window whose view it depicts, replete with the Met Life Tower, a squat brick-and-terra-cotta Romanesque Revival building on Broadway and a new needle building of intense blue. The artist’s instinctive color corrections, a deep purple sky sprinkled with gold glitter and a small water tower described in startling shades of peach and lavender. His other style is more contemporary and improvisational, an unlikely merger of the line and energy of graffiti and with the atmospheric veils of Color Field painting. In “Autumn in ‘Minty’ NYC” at Gordon Robichaux, white lines wend through pours of watery green, defining different buildings, for a strange, aqueous effect.

Occasionally the two styles meet in the middle, as in “Looking North Out of My Studio” at Gordon Robichaux. It begins with the top corner of a solidly painted brick apartment building and then gives way to an expanse of New York skyscrapers that float like a vision.

Tabboo!’s paintings are for omnivorous eyes. They are delicious, fresh and transparent, revealing every touch of color, every pour and drip. They combine the totality of his sensibility: the instinct for playing pairs of brilliant color off one another; the extensive repertoire of dashed-off architectural details, descended from his posters; the penchant for throwaway gestures and the glamour, irony and aloofness of drag. New York looks especially beautiful in tones of pink and purple, or in diaphanous blues or oranges with judicious sprinklings of glitter, as a kind of other. It is the place where many arriving malcontents cheer up and misfits feel at home for the first time.

Tabboo!’s graphic ephemera left their mark on the 1980s East Village scene. His paintings have become among the best of this moment, and they only get

better. His entire output deserves a retrospective from a cleareyed museum, preferably in New York.