

REVIEWS

Mary Weatherford

BRENNAN & GRIFFIN

Mary Weatherford moved from New York back to her native Southern California in 1999. Ever since, her abstract paintings have drawn their inspiration from the landscape of her home state, focusing on motifs such as a coastal rock at Malibu or a cave at Pismo Beach, as well as on less geographically specific details such as tangles of vine or the remnants of sea life that wash up on the shore. Weatherford is not afraid to wear these inspirations on her sleeve, even at the risk of seeming naive: Over the years, she's repeatedly affixed seashells and starfish to her fields of exuberant color. If this makes them more redolent of a summer camp arts-and-crafts project than of high-style painting, so be it: A lot of the best art of our time works by breaching rather than recoiling from the boundaries of kitsch, and Weatherford has shown herself to be as daring as she is sophisticated in what's been called the "embarrassed lyricism" of her flirtations with the saccharine.

Weatherford's recent abstract paintings incorporating neon tubes don't quite touch the same chords of sentiment as those beachcomber reveries, but they do compromise the purity of the painted canvas in related and equally debatable ways, and they likewise play on nostalgia—this time for the city she left behind more than a decade ago. But while the show was called "Manhattan," and the individual paintings bore titles such as *Varick St.* and *Chinatown* (all works 2012), you'd have been hard put to make out any specific references to the sights of the city then or now. My guess is that the New York that these works refer to is the one that subsists in the paintings of those who flourished here in the four decades preceding Weatherford's own arrival in 1984, mainly the Abstract Expressionists and Color Field painters, the Pollocks and de Koonings, but also the Frankenthalers and Olitskis—which means, in turn, the art-historically validated together with the critically sidelined.

Painting with *Flashe*, a vinyl-based paint that allows for effects of gouachelike translucency without loss of chromatic vibrancy, even when the paint is densely layered, Weatherford evokes Technicolor skies in *Chinatown* and *Coney Island*—has she forgotten that this particular peninsula is not in the borough of her title?—while in *Empire* and *Varick St.*, she delves into nocturnal subtleties that even Whistler might have appreciated. Either way, her color is ravishing—but it always fades out well before the edge of the canvas, framing and thereby distancing her abstract

imagery. Yet strangely, the device that should press Weatherford's painted gestures even farther into the background—her use of neon light—succeeds in incorporating her painted color into its garish yet somehow delicate atmosphere, thereby lending the chroma a renewed sense of immediacy. This is perhaps least true in *Coney Island*, in which three neon hues—white, yellow, and blue—blend with the painted ones yet not with each other. But in the other three paintings here, in each of which just a single tube crosses the painting either vertically, like an artificial Barnett Newman "zip," or horizontally, the retro glow functions beautifully as a clarion climax to a coloristic symphony. And then the casually exposed wiring and hardware bring us back coolly to the workaday world that is also, after all, Manhattan.

—Barry Schwabsky

Mary Weatherford, *Empire*, 2012, *Flashe* paint and neon on linen, 105 x 79".

