

Art in America

NEW YORK

Mary Weatherford at Debs & Co.

It's Easter in Weatherford's recent paintings, and she is celebrating with a Sunday at the beach. Almost all the works included in this show, titled "Easter," are made with flashe and tiny starfish. And almost all strike a delicate balance between picturing the seashore and the empyrean.

Space Monkey, the big canvas that greeted viewers, is particularly evocative of hot white sands and Mediterranean blue water. On the left side, broad strokes of chalky paint sketch a rough-edged beach; to the right, a flat expanse of warm blue is studded with little dried starfish, some painted to match the azure background. A few starfish seem to have been temporarily placed before the final blue was applied, leaving lighter areas beneath them—traces of process that are also a little like the glow of astral bodies in deep space.

Elsewhere, the marine motif is less explicit. In *Big Red Margaret Head*, the silhouette of a shaggy-haired woman's head doubles as a clay-red promontory jutting into a vast black sky. Here the starfish are nearly extinguished by inky paint, or camouflaged by the red of Margaret's hair. By contrast, the unpainted starfish in the much smaller painting *Plum* fairly radiate from within their wine-dark sea. The supple, linear

rhythms of Miró's landscapes seem pertinent to these works, and, sometimes, as in *Heavy on Top*, the simple pleasures of Milton Avery. Here, Weatherford has a shimmering expanse of orange meet a dazzling blue sky at a gently broken horizon; a few starfish appear to have peeled off in the heat, leaving faint prints behind. On the other hand, there's not much doubt about the reference in *Eyes in the Heat*, which redoes Pollock's turbulent painting as a taut, white-hot expanse interrupted only by two symmetrically positioned snail shells. Curling into themselves with perfect inscrutability, the painted shells help sustain a poise that broadly parodies the volcanic instability of Pollock's work.

Also reliant on a dialogue between alter egos is the pair of small canvases called *Sweet Days of Summer*. In the first, a handful of tiny clamshells is scattered like flower petals on a pinkish ground beneath a cool green sea. In the second canvas, where a whiter stretch of sand borders an acid-green ocean, similar clamshells are clotted together gracelessly, their shiny pink insides suggesting a scabrous skin disease. These two *Sweet Days of Summers* make it clear that fragility and tenderness are not always comfortable conditions.

These paintings depart markedly from Weatherford's earlier, targetlike abstractions, but as a group they play well together. Nursery decor (Saint-Exupéry comes to mind), boardwalk tchotchkes and blameless lyricism all have a role. Or, put another way, Weatherford's recent work balances nostalgic longing, critical self-awareness and—it's Easter, after all—a good measure of transcendence.

—Nancy Princenthal



Mary Weatherford: *Space Monkey*, 1998, flashe and starfish on canvas, 60 inches square; at Debs & Co.