

# TIBOR DE NAGY

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## Saturday Around Sara D. Roosevelt



Shari Mendelson, *Ram Bearer*, 2023. Repurposed plastic and mixed media, 20 1/2 x 8 x 5 inches. Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

By [Oliver Katz](#)

The air is almost viscous on the street today, September 9, and I'm here on Forsyth Street. I'm sitting in Sara D. Roosevelt Park, that long narrow park which roughly defines the western boundary of the Lower East Side. It stretches from Houston down to the intersection where the wide freneticism of Canal Street is subsumed into the mouth of the Manhattan Bridge. I'm walking around this part of the neighborhood today, and I find myself returning back to this park after each destination. Like the best parts of the city, it's a space designed for people on foot, leaving each street goer no choice but to engage with the space and people around them, to

become a kinetic citizen of their city. There's no air-conditioned backseat to take in the city from—it's right here, overcast, muggy. A kid is riding on his father's shoulders. A woman holds a miniature fan up to her face. A grandmother is holding her grandson by the wrist—not the hand—as they walk, but tenderly. A neutral gray light is cast over everything today, always threatening to intensify into rain, a fact which is not ideal for the galleries that are opening their new shows for the fall. After a half hour of escalation, the thunder comes in: *BOOM!!!*

“Great! A thunderstorm right before the opening,” jokes Garrett Klein, of Massey Klein Gallery. He and his wife Ryan Massey are directors of the gallery, and they have let me in just before the official opening of *A memory, eternal*, a solo show of oils by Bethany Czarnecki. They are accompanied by their three-month-old, Noah, who is present in a baby-sling for the whole evening. I keep getting drawn into these pale purple outlines in the big painting facing the street, *Burning Summit*, which, like others in the show (all 2023), uses a palette that is disparate but deeply congruous. It's only once you stand close that you can even see the wisps of green and halos of purple, but you realize that they're doing heavy lifting, adding a sweet aesthetic nuance that's almost geological. A language of natural forms is present throughout Czarnecki's work here, both human gestures and mineral formations. In other paintings, like *Electric Geysir*, Czarnecki explores these forms in less organic color schemes, with tendrils that reach out in bright green and orange and sedate blue.

A journey back across the skinny park brings me to Rivington Street, where Betty Cuninghame Gallery is opening *Krazy Paradise*, an exhibition of recent work by John Lees. The oil paintings in this show are textured and unpretentious, imbued with a self-aware sense of humor. Lees doesn't need the pathos other painters rely on to make his paintings visually profound. He's not trying to be a tragic painter, aiming instead for an easygoing ambiguity. My favorites here use rich, bright colors that pierce through the nebulous forms. In *Man in Yellow Pants Sitting in Armchair* (2022), the yellow of the pants, the dark chartreuse of the armchair, and a murky but vivid purple that floats behind the titular man's head each add a jazzy vibrance to the almost humorously banal subject matter. Lees is at his best when his images are discernible but slightly spectral, as in the central figure of *Old Mountebank* (2015/23), who looms in a vague moonlight. It's hard to tell where his robe begins and ends, and his feet are drawn in black crayon several times, as if they are in multiple places at once. Some paintings veer too far into clear-cut figuration, others too far into visual obscurity, but most strike the balance effectively.

The ghostliness continues next door at Tibor de Nagy, who just opened Shari Mendelson's *Chasing the Deer*, a series of small artifact-like sculptures cast in mineral shades one might consider off-white, light light-blue, light light-green, and pale gold. In her just-released memoir *Everything/Nothing/Someone*, Alice Carrière speaks about extremely thin drinking glasses that her mother, painter Jennifer Bartlett, had custom-made with the intention of being as close to nothingness as possible. A similar idea seems to be in play here with Mendelson's sculptures, which are so light and ephemeral that they had to be glued to their pedestals with museum wax so they don't blow over when the door opens. Mendelson draws from a disparate set of cultural references for her subject matter, including an ancient Mesopotamian cylinder seal in *Chasing the Deer* and an Instagram post of her friend carrying a goat in *Ram Bearer* (2023). Mendelson's deft technique completely obscures the fact that all of

these works are made out of regular plastic bottles, the socio-cultural and environmental implications of which are intriguing, creating a subtle interplay between ancient artifact-hood and throwaway consumer detritus.

The light is fading now, and a walk back across Sara D. Roosevelt provides a window to watch the nightly game of pick up soccer. After seeing a bunch of exciting new art, for a great evening of nearly-free entertainment, buy a couple tall cans of beer with a friend or two and watch these guys play in the evenings until it gets too dark and they start missing too many shots.

## **Contributor**

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