



“Small Wonders”

By Pac Pobric

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The most compelling part of Victoria Gitman’s fantastic exhibition at the Garth Greenan Gallery is the way her paintings glow. Her eight new pictures — all highly naturalistic, close-up depictions of purses and handbags — radiate with bright colors and jarring juxtapositions. In one work, alongside a fuzzy pattern of alternating black and white fur, there is an explosive field of lush, neon green that overwhelms the picture. In another, eighteen strips of fur — one in fuschia, another in rich, golden brown, all anchored by a central strip of luminous, radioactive yellow — burst off the wood panel they’re painted on. The finest painting in the show has two patches of white fur surrounding one of deep blue, which is set back in space as if it’s emerging from behind two curtains.

Gitman works small. The new paintings are generally as large as postcards, and none is bigger than nine and a half inches in any direction. This scale forces her to work with single-haired brushes and to paint slowly and carefully. Yet Gitman is not simply a technician. Her work is plush and decorative, but never removed from long debates in painting. One of her touchstones is the French Romantic painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, whose opulent portrait drawings Gitman once faithfully re-created in precise oil paintings. She also shares something with the German artist Gerhard Richter. His portrait paintings from the 1970s are as exacting about recreating photograph as Gitman’s are about depicting jewelry and accessories.

Using a truncated framing device in her newest paintings, Gitman paints each handbag in tight perspective. So on one level, her works are pure abstractions. This marks a change in her style. In previous paintings of rings, necklaces, purses, and coin cases, Gitman did not obscure her subject. Her 2015 show at Garth Greenan had seven paintings of handbags that showed them in full, tactfully set against backgrounds of matching colors. Similarly, in the Ingres works, her copies are scaled but full reproductions. The new pictures, on the other hand, foreground pattern above representation, and mine naturalism in painting for its abstract qualities. It’s as if she’s been honing an idea, isolating it, refining it, enlarging its details, and then shrinking the final product back down to its smallest manageable size.

Gitman was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1972 and immigrated to the United States in 1987, settling in Miami, where she still lives. In 1996, she graduated from Florida International University with a degree in painting. She was always a studious naturalist. Early in her career, she might have been considered a portraitist who followed in the long tradition of learning by copying. Her first mature paintings were based on works by Old Master artists like the Italian mannerist Bronzino and the Dutch golden age master Vermeer. In one picture from 1998, titled *Self Representation After Bronzino*, she painted herself wearing a white blouse in four different poses against a black background. It’s an unsettling work; which one is the real Gitman, and what explains her hollow expression? The picture reveals not only her deep comprehension of Bronzino’s neat naturalism, but also their shared understanding that realism is a

flexible convention that can be bent to disconcerting ends.

Gitman also has contemporary parallels. Her new works, at their most abstract, look like Sean Scully's paintings of rich slabs of clashing color. Both have a deep and demonstrated love for the fullness of oil paint, and a sense for how to make a picture as lush as possible. Yet Scully is a distinctly non-representational painter, whereas Gitman hedges her bets, bringing her close to the Latvian American artist Vija Celmins, whose meticulous representational depictions of nature often look as otherworldly as Gitman's latest works. But again the comparison is only approximate. It is hard to imagine Gitman presenting a painting of an object alongside the object itself, as Celmins sometimes does. For Gitman, the thing itself is just something to paint; what matters is the picture itself.

In the end, the artist with whom Gitman shares the most is the Italian modernist Giorgio Morandi. For 45 years in the early to mid twentieth century, Morandi took on the curious project of painting pictures of vases, flowers, and tabletops as a meditation on the potential of figuration after abstraction. A picture like his *Still Life* from 1949 (owned by MOMA) is quietly crowded, unbalanced, and difficult to gauge visually. The objects look firmly placed on the table, but the space is so flat, it's as if everything might slip right off and shatter. Like some of Gitman's works, and especially her newest ones, Morandi's pictures tremble with nervous energy. Gitman's work pulsates in a different way. Her paintings tend to be vivid, whereas Morandi's are made of muted grays, browns, and pale greens. But their work has a similar pursuit: Both wonder aloud about the value of representation. When is a handbag more than a handbag? How can it be used to reflect on the relationship between a painting and its subject? It is an old question. And Gitman, to her enormous credit, makes it new and once again rigorous without ever losing her charming touch.