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Review: Joan Miró, 'Oiseaux Dans l'Espace'

By ROBERTA SMITH

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“Birds Making Merry for Daybreak,” a Joan Miró oil painting from 1968 and part of an exhibition at Nahmad Contemporary. Credit Successió Miró/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via ADAGP, Paris, 2015

“The Birth of the World,” Joan Miró’s clairvoyant masterpiece from 1927, presaged much of postwar American painting — the early date can elicit a double take when you see it at the Museum of Modern Art. Its expansive surface of thin gray pours and washes, and the delicate lines and shapes in black, red and white that dance across them, open a pathway to so much: the automatic drawing of Surrealism, the frank painterliness and scale of Abstract Expressionism and the lightness and elegance of Color Field painting.

So when Miró (1893-1983) took tips from the Abstract Expressionists on his first trip to New York in 1947 and again in 1959, he was learning from artists who had already learned from him.

This fascinating show proposes that encountering New York painting enabled Miró to lose some of his refinement and play up a roughness and scale only intermittently visible

before. Rather than delicate and nib thin, his lines thickened, brightened and became more dominant, no longer subservient to shapes. “Bird in the Night” is spareness itself: not much more than an open black ovoid and a looping red wishbone that effortlessly summon nest, egg and occupant. Elsewhere Miró improvised layer upon layer, adding a parade of harlequin creatures over a big brown splash of runny paint in “Figures, Birds,” and in “Woman and Bird in the Night,” girdling a series of colorful dots and scribbles in black. Nearly every canvas here is a different excursion into paint, materiality and poetic suggestion. The ensemble enlarges and contemporizes Miró, especially in a commercial gallery’s relatively intimate viewing conditions.

Nahmad Contemporary
980 Madison Avenue, at 76th Street, Upper East Side
Through July 18

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