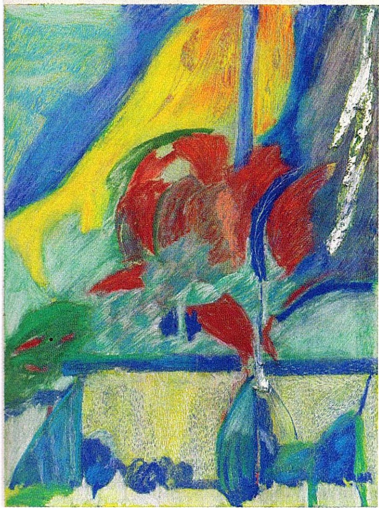


## Mimi Lauter

DEREK ELLER GALLERY

Seeing Mimi Lauter's work for the first time brought home to me how rare it is to see contemporary painting whose substance is rich and full-bodied but possibly inchoate, rather than style, topicality, or an arm's-length commentary on art history. Lauter's work is clearly imbued with historical self-consciousness—the press release rightly cites “Redon, Vuillard, Bonnard, as well as other members of the Nabis



Mimi Lauter, *Untitled*, 2018, soft pastel and oil pastel on paper, 20½ x 12”.

and Post-Impressionists” among the Los Angeles-based artist's precursors, to which list I would add *Blaue Reiter*-period Kandinsky and maybe a few more recent explorers of the cusp between evocation and abstraction, among them Howard Hodgkin and Thomas Nozkowski. But one didn't get the feeling that clever stylistic triangulation—deriving a familiar-yet-fresh signature style from a chosen set of progenitors—is the point of her work. Rather, any such synthesis is the result of a more personal attempt to distill an evocation of lived and remembered experience from visual and tactile sensation.

This show, “Devotional Flowers,” was Lauter's first in New York. All the works, most of which were *Untitled* and dated 2018, were in her preferred medium, pastel on paper. Using both traditional soft pastels and oil pastels, which have a heavier, less powdery consistency, the artist layers her densely packed and interfusing marks to build elaborate surfaces, sometimes achieving a delicious funkiness; among the work's strengths is how its color feels so inextricable from its facture. Lauter makes matter indistinguishable from radiance, or radiance from matter—here, I couldn't tell which should come first. In any case, she steers far from the delicacy one stereotypically associates with pastels; color gets zingy, at times overripe. Several of the works were unusually large in scale for the medium, measuring up to fifty-five by seventy-two inches. Her compositions are built of shifting accumulations of intense color—tones that echo and respond to each other, like a chorus of murmurs that adds up to a roar—rather than anchored by distinct shapes or forms. These innumerable, intricately patterned gestures nod toward the ornamental, yet their massed effect was visceral and rather heavy—monumental, even in the smallest of the pieces, yet also intangible. It was as if the air inside these paintings had been suffused by the pungent aroma of exotic flowers, making it hard to breathe—an experience both heady and slightly alarming.

It was the heavily scented hothouse atmosphere, rather than the floral forms that recurred in many of the works, that the exhibition's title referred to. These were mostly not, in the end, abstracted still lifes, and one could find any number of figurative allusions throughout: bodies, heads, hands, of which one caught glimpses without quite being able to focus on them. Several of the works were diptychs, with a small horizontal sheet floating above a larger vertical or squarish one. One might have thought of a transom window over a doorway, or perhaps

a predella incongruously placed above rather than below the main panel of an altarpiece. This unusual configuration suggested an underlying architectural structure that one would not otherwise have expected inside this profusion.

But what about the evocation of religious art in the title's first word, “Devotional”? That could have been misleading, given the show's unabashedly voluptuous sensuality. And yet Lauter's paintings evince a keen, almost obsessive concentration on the possibility of touching, or being touched by, something inherently indefinable—a sense of yearning not unlike an aspiration toward the transcendent.

—Barry Schwabsky