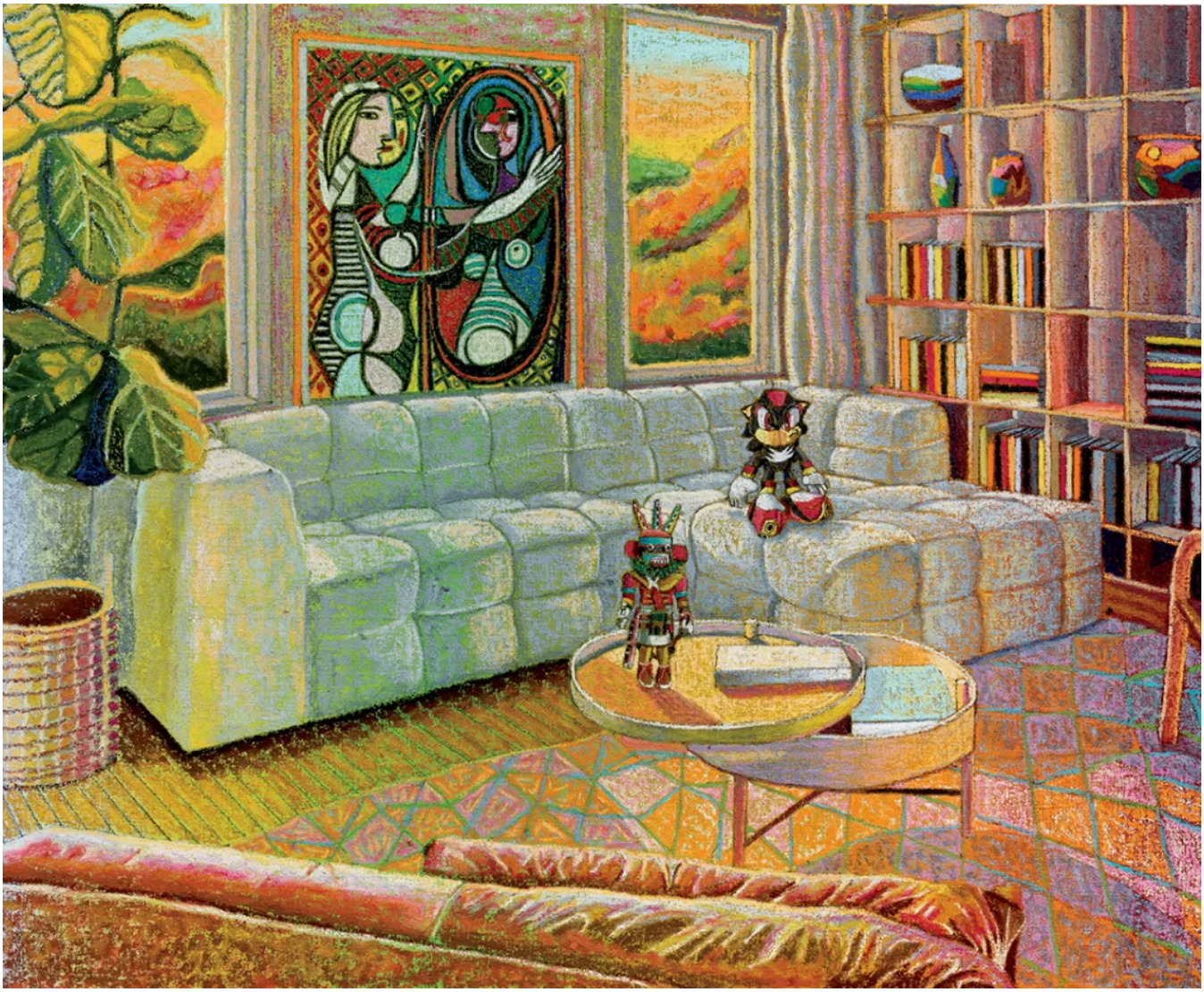
REVIEWS NEW YORK

JJ Manford

Derek Eller Gallery

By Donald Kuspit



You might know a place called Hayden Rowe Street—as JJ Manford titled his exhibition of paintings here—in Hopkinton, Massachusetts. It's a colonial burg, incorporated in 1715, with 215 properties listed in the US National Register of Historic Places. It is also a well-to-do area: Many of the houses on this tony boulevard are quite grand, even palatial, while others are more self-contained and insular, as though oblivious to the outside world. Manford showed us their upscale interiors or the bucolic views from their porches.

No human beings appeared in these images, although the occasional creature (a cat, a bird) entered the scene. The pictures were populated mostly by objects, natural or manufactured, carefully staged and richly colored, obtaining a kind of hallucinatory presence, often intensified by the odd angle from which we entered the depicted spaces. Manford calls himself a *chromophiliac*—the term refers to "intense passion and love for color," according to artist and writer David Batchelor. This, coupled with Manford's penchant for the surrealistic, gave these works an unabashedly psychedelic flair.

Yet it was hard to tell whether the artist admired these spaces (and the ways their invisible well-to-do inhabitants live) or if he was just obsessively describing them (as if in utter disbelief of their garish opulence). There was plenty of ostentation, as *Living Room with Picasso Poster, Shadow, & Kachina Doll* (all works 2023) made clear. A souvenir replica of the Spanish painter's *Girl Before a Mirror*, 1932, hangs behind an enormous all-white couch. The sectional and the abstracted figure's pale belly form a decorative couple, their pretentiousness announced by the nightmarishly grandiose leaves of the plant visible to the left of the poster—a moment of so-called reality more inherently absurd than the artificially distorted *fille*. The volumes and ceramic objects on display in the bookcase nearby seem to be there for decorative effect. The two dolls that punctuate the scene suggest that everything in this picture is invented, to allude to aesthetician Kendall Walton's theory of mimesis as make-believe. It is as though the living room is a nursery, inviting us to play a children's game. We enter a fictional space, but one that is emotionally convincing and even cognitively intriguing.

In *Berkshires Porch Scene (Porch with Woodpecker, Woodie the Woodpecker Vase, and Steve Keister Sun)*, we were invited to compare a "real" version of the namesake creature with its cartoon cousin, to try to solve the epistemological and aesthetic puzzle of their relationship. Manford posed such questions everywhere in this show and toyed with us by conflating different permutations of low and high culture (one noteworthy example was *Chris Van Allsburg Living Room with Calder Lithograph*, which pairs the furnishings of a popular commercial illustrator with a print from a legendary modernist sculptor). Ecumenical and open-eyed, Manford accepts avant-garde art, however much it has been domesticated as decoration. Yet, more subtly, he seems to suggest that vanguard art inevitably ends up as kitsch—and vice-versa—as his front-and-centering of vintage cookie jars (Tony the Tiger, a Nelson McCoy "owl couple") in other paintings indicated. These objets trouvés have pride of place in the artist's compositions, signifying this reversal of value—let us recall that Andy Warhol also collected cookie jars.

Although Manford constructs his spaces with meticulous irony, it is clear that he is taken with nature, which exists in odd harmony with the more man-made elements of his tableaux. Yet his version of the outdoors often feels manicured or landscaped, suggesting that the artist is a romantic manqué who is, as we observed in a number of these pictures, stuck on a porch rather than out in the wild. Life seemed an afterthought in these perversely dreamlike works, existing only in traces. While art pervaded every space, no one was around to see it.