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Kurt McVey, "Robert Nava: With Flying Colors at Vito Schnabel,"
WhiteHot Magazine, March 2021.



Robert Nava: With Flying Colors at Vito Schnabel



Installation view: Robert Nava, *Angels*, Vito Schnabel Gallery, New York, February 25 – April 10, 2021 © Robert Nava; Photo by Argenis Apolinario; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery.

By KURT MCVEY March, 2021

There are several options afforded to an art critic when contemplating the existence of *Robert Nava: Angels* at Vito Schnabel Gallery in Chelsea: Ignore the show critically or entirely; simply experience the show as a humble fan of art; choose to write about it as if it exists in a bubble; or write about it as though it doesn't exist in a bubble. What is preferable, right, ideal or ethical depends on who you are and who you ask. For critics who are known to also interview artists, there's always an open mind, the benefit of the doubt, and privileged, direct access to the creator.

Pulling back a moment, an action which itself might be indicative of a certain modicum of privilege, there seems to be quite a bit of emphasis being affixed to art that previously hasn't but perhaps should be contextualized as more "interesting" or more "important" than most other art out there currently. If there is a hierarchy of importance, which there may very well be, one must be talking about the notion that human, fleshy bodies, our own bodies perhaps, are in immediate danger somewhere or everywhere in the Earth realm; whether in some frighteningly close or desperately far away quadrant of our mundane, political, base reality. This is because to a large degree, pain is how most human beings define their reality—the pain of loss, of being ignored, oppressed, overlooked, misunderstood, under-appreciated, controlled, abused, intimidated, bullied or outright assaulted. Pain is the prime measuring tool by which human beings seem to gauge importance and urgency, whether in the ER waiting room, in the playground, in the newsroom, or in the gallery or museum. It is the cruel but critical pinch on the cheek of the lucid dreamer. For many contemporary artists working today, it's stigmata or bust.

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Robert Nava, Cloud Rider Angel, 2020, Acrylic and grease pencil on canvas, 85 x 73 inches (215.9 cm x 185.4 cm)

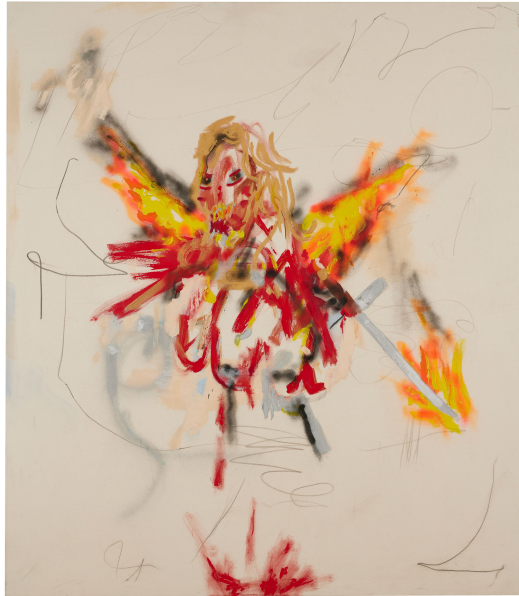
So where does the East Chicago-born (1985) artist Robert Nava's first solo show in New York City, *Angels*, fall within the hierarchy of importance; whether in the "art world," in Manhattan, in American culture, in "the West," on the planet, in all seen and unseen dimensions? Angels, as we understand them in art and culture, or within the root, sacred texts of ancient wisdom traditions, generally exist beyond the flesh, beyond pain, often perceiving it at a removal, barring some kind of possession, divine intervention or gnostic communion. Nava's show doesn't appear to be addressing human pain or anyone's specific trauma directly, but it might be acknowledging this larger, pervasive cultural pain complex from afar. Can or should this expanded, more abstract and obtuse perspective be viewed as valid or even important in our dangerous and beautiful world?

Identity, whether the artist's own or the "personalities" or character traits behind or affixed to whatever angelic archetype-Michael, Gabriel, Metatron, etc.-never came up when walking and mask-talking mellow half-speed Sorkin-style with Mr. Nava at Vito Schnabel's brand new, considerably spacious 19th Street gallery in Chelsea (Schnabel also has galleries in Manhattan's West Village and in St. Moritz, Switzerland). One might assume Nava painted his *Angels*, these archetypal seraphim, in order to make a commentary on transmitted and transmuted semiotics and other iconography throughout the ages; where the pseudo-religious cannon meets the art cannon. These could be cave drawings, temple, pottery and chalice carvings depicting gnostic (near-death or psychedelic) experiences run through Cy Twombly, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Julian Schnabel, Neil Jenney, Joan Brown and Futura (the latest and the "2000" version), but made in Bushwick during a confusing, troubling, overwhelmingly hermetic and contemplative 2020.

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Robert Nava, *Red Archangel*, 2019, Acrylic and grease pencil on canvas,
82 x 72 inches (208.3 x 182.9 cm)

The first painting made in this series, *Red Archangel*, (2019) actually sprung from an earlier 2018 work that began as a painting of an airplane and slowly morphed into its current form. Nava noted during the interview that no contemporary artist, as far as he was concerned, had really explored the entire syncretic and dogmatic cannon of angelic beings. One might diagnose a certain “outsider” artist approach here and this might be half true, but Nava, an Ivy MFA, lacks the (not necessarily requisite) fanatical obsession or compulsory pseudo-religiosity often affixed to classic “outsider” artists.

“I was thinking of the elements before the angels,” says Nava. “I eventually want to make an angel made entirely of lightning or not just that, a lightning wolf. I just wanted to paint fire and try it out. The seraphim literally translates to ‘the burning ones,’ so the meaning caught up after.”

A critic must at some point contend with the uncanny, stymying existence of Basquiat’s 1981 painting, *Fallen Angel*. The existence of this painting, which is an earlier representation of this old archetype, seems to occupy clear, established art cannon *terra firma* regarding subject, style, tone, medium, color, line and overall execution. Not only that, *Fallen Angel* is objectively more complex, inventive and layered than most of what Nava offers up, even without Basquiat’s name recognition or the forty years the work has had to marinate in its own importance. So why paint these “bad” paintings at all and why exhibit them now? Is it all (hypothetically) one larger, diluted homage? Nava, perhaps refreshingly, couldn’t or wouldn’t divulge. A writer must write, a painter must paint. *Angels* just...happened.

“Now is a tricky thing,” says Nava. “I just wanted to do it because I haven’t seen it myself.”

Nava, a 2011 Yale MFA grad in painting who just got scooped up by Pace Gallery, doesn’t seem to carry some kind of institutional or academic mandate regarding the work he makes or how he talks about it. Because of or in spite of this perhaps, he’s broken through into Blue Chip territory with literal flying colors. Certain writers have, as recently as this Fall, complained that Pace’s program in particular isn’t “woke” enough. Wait until they get a load of Nava. There was no indication when speaking with the artist, that crisis or identity, as humans currently perceive it politically, had, has or will have anything to do with *Angels*, the inaugural exhibition at the new Chelsea gallery. Not on the surface at least. Not as an easy click-bait

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headline or kicker. Not unless the viewer chooses to project or reflect on their own identity, which is of course valid. Does this mean the show can't possibly be considered as interesting, vital or important as crisis-addressing or identity-reinforcing art at this time, that is, in this ongoing watershed moment? Is Nava's new series (hypothetically) just child's play by comparison? Just taking up space? A cash-grab? A distraction? 15 great big trivialities on canvas?



Robert Nava, *Night Storm Angel*, 2021, Acrylic, grease pencil, and crayon on canvas, 85 x 73 inches (215.9 x 185.4 cm)

"It comes down to integrity," says Nava while standing in front of *Night Storm Angel*, (2021), one of many large-scale works rendered up in acrylic, grease pencil, and crayon on canvas. "When you care, the soul shows." What's interesting about this piece and moment in the conversation, is that Nava was open about there being several bad or failed paintings underneath the final canvas. What does this mean when the final product falls within the genre of what the New Museum's founding curator Marcia Tucker dubbed "bad" painting?

Tucker laid out her theory regarding "bad" painting in 1978. But in 2021, how many "bad" paintings are actually good and how many truly bad, derivative or conspicuously unskilled paintings skate or even thrive based on their perceived cultural or societal importance? One could reference the writer Dean Kissick's "The Rise of Bad Figurative Painting" in *The Spectator* for a gentle, non-identarian deconstruction of this new inversion of "Crapstraction."

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Nava's "too skilled to be unskilled" *Angels* invite or perhaps reignite this (meta) conversation in a manner that hasn't been seen in almost a decade. At a time when critics and art consumers have become the new "Zombie Formalists," intellectually assuming the same lazy populism as the derivative AbEx works of the late 20th and early 21st century, Nava's 15 *Angels* (seraphim, cherubim, guardian spirits and demons) are refreshingly confident in their "badness," enough to invite actual criticism at a time where most artists are incapable of processing or receiving it. Why accept or embrace criticism in the age of the ad-hominem? Here's an opinion: Nava's "bad" paintings are actually quite good, interesting, soulful, and yes, even important. But how? Why?



Jean-Michel Basquiat, Untitled (Fallen Angel), 1981

Considering the existence of Basquiat's *Fallen Angel* especially, Nava's *Angels* cannot be reviewed in a bubble, though they can absolutely be experienced that way. There is a difference. To be taken seriously, critically, and in 2021 no less, they must be seen and contextualized as a peaceful, declarative, even defiant statement of total artistic freedom, even if they do little to propel "painting" itself forward.

Perhaps Schnabel, via Nava, is setting a very specific tone for the 19th Street space. That is that all human opinions, perspectives, comments and critiques are welcome and that art can exist outside of shifting, subjective political mandates. Mr. Schnabel's next exhibition at his 43 Clarkson St. space in NYC is a joint show with Man Ray and (Francis) Picabia. These two avant-garde artists were pushing "problematic" narratives regarding "gaze" in all its permutations in a more self-conscious manner than contemporary critics often choose to recognize. Where Nava's work invites reactionary chatter concerning its childlike touch or approach, which will allow it to be easily dismissed, especially in the current institutional marketplace and within activist or crisis art journalism, it also exudes a child's raw, unburdened, unencumbered, unpolluted, perhaps even angelic confidence, that light-infused Twombly magic Sally Mann was still chasing long after the big man's death. This effectively creates seemingly infinite space for the viewer to have their own, highly personal experience, so much so that Nava himself was hesitant to project his own life-experiences onto his work, let alone speak in-depth to his own pain, grievance or childhood trauma, which includes at least six near-death experiences (four car accidents and childhood choking and drowning incidents). *Angels* is a childlike dream within a fortress of concentric bubbles. There is a clear desire to protect Nava and his innocence. Understood.

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*Robert Nava, Volcanic Angel, 2020, Acrylic and grease pencil on canvas,
85 x 73 inches (215.9 x 185.4 cm)*

The angel or seraph as an archetype *and* symbol, caught in a Pop-Jungian uroboros, which is connected to but by no means tethered to Judeo-Christian dogma, is a clever and timely unifying subject that compels the viewer to look within as opposed to without. This is an essential process and step in collective human evolution at this critical moment in history. The quantity of paintings as well as their scale, diversity of color, form, texture and mood, provides a plethora of positive and at times surprisingly intense trigger points for individuals across the vast human spectrum. The show is an open invitation to all races, ages, genders and nationalities to engage with art and the nature of “reality” and all its complexity without boundaries, mandates, rules, codes or restrictions; without guilt, shame, pressure or fear.

“I see them as protectors, but not all of them,” says Nava. “Some of them aren’t necessarily there to be your friend. I’m reading, but I’m not studying in depth. Some are pretty dark. I’m not translating those narratives (Judeo-Christian, Syrian, Sumerian, Egyptian) to the canvas.”

The hierarchy that matters here, what’s paramount, is a metaphysical dimensional hierarchy that asks us to contemplate forces and vibrations beyond the immediate, perceivable flesh, beyond the socio-political cum cultural hierarchy of intersectional pain and oppression, valid, interesting and important as that ideology and the art tethered to that ideology can be, will be or has been. Angels, however, invites its viewers to look past the surface data to once more place emphasis on content of character, a practice that requires time, faith and maybe some healthy unlearning. Much like the archetype and the symbol, like energy and mass, like the chicken or the egg, the political and apolitical must be equally explored and entertained simultaneously. Angels is about Knowing. Knowing what works, what’s right, what’s important and what’s good, in art, and in our souls.

"My line is childlike but not childish. It is very difficult to fake...to get that quality you need to project yourself into the child's line. It has to be felt." Cy Twombly.

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