

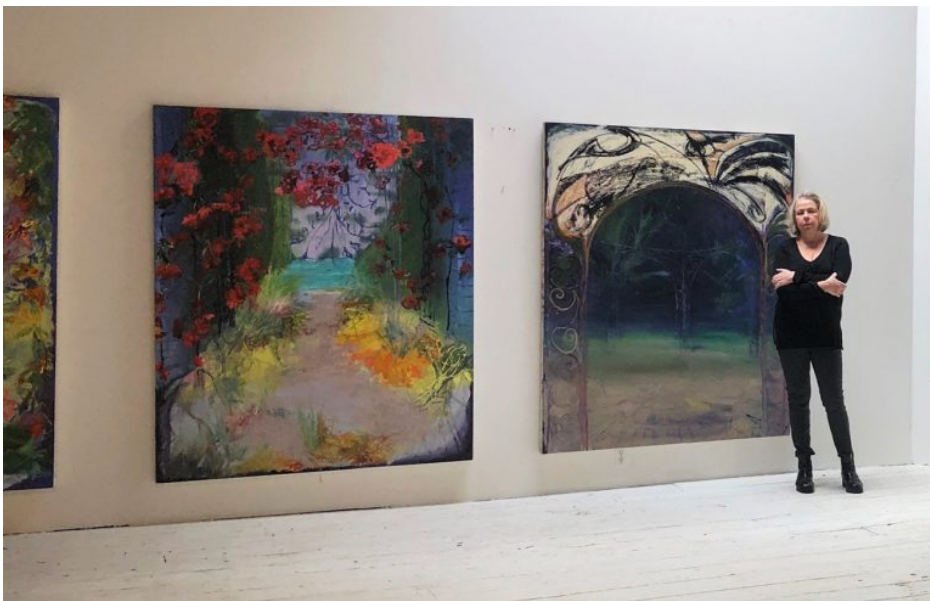
ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

MARCH 30, 2019 BY DANIELLE BURNHAM

Lizbeth Mitty & Dana James: The Thread

at M. DAVID & CO. GALLERY extended thru APRIL 21st, 2019 and an artist talk on April 14th at 4PM with Lilly Wei



Lizbeth Mitty in her studio. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Dana James in her studio. Photo courtesy of Drew Reynolds

I met with rising talent artist [Dana James](#) and her mother, veteran NYC artist [Lizbeth Mitty](#), prior to their joint exhibition, “The Thread,” which opened March 15th at [M. David & Co. Gallery](#) in Bushwick. It was late February, and the artists were trying to answer the lingering question: Which new works should we display?

The debate was an extension of a conversation that had been running for months. Throughout the creative process, alone in their respective studios, the artists had frequently exchanged feedback on works in progress, eschewing criticism for constructive, “technical” suggestions that served to “open the floodgates” and renew the other’s creative energy.

The conversation also extended to the exhibition title, which was in fact a seamless, simultaneous reference to their relationship and a singular modus operandi: just as James literally “threaded” scraps of different fibers into her canvases, blood and history like a “thread” connected them through the generations. It was a title both poetic and unequivocal.

Therefore, the question at hand was a vital one: whatever pieces they decided to display, it was imperative that the work transmit this mother-daughter dialogue.

It was clear how important this decision was; for, even in viewing Mitty’s and James’s new bodies of work separately, it was evident that there was a conversation at hand. In one sense, they speak through color; each artist employs a unique palette, such that Mitty’s rich, bold hues and James’s softer tints serve to complement one another, bolster the impact of the other, and highlight each artist’s distinct creative decisions. For instance, Mitty’s work betrays a deliberate hand—such as in the careful arrangement of each blossoming flower—which accents the more accidental forms in James’s pieces, from cracks in the paint to the path of paint poured. In the

same fashion, the more abstract element of James's paintings spotlights Mitty's use of narrative forms, as if they were "blown up versions of [Mitty's] strokes," as James puts it.

Every time I write about James, she is at a crossroads in her career. When I saw her in November 2018, I had noticed a new narrative element to her work: something ephemeral, something winged. She had just finished the painting, she told me, and it was still wet. I had marveled at the vitality of her art, how it was alive and breathing and fervent right up until the moment it was surrendered. What I didn't realize at the time was that it heralded the works on view at "The Thread." In pieces like "Dragonfly II" (2019), for example, fragments of iridescent wings and the semi-discernible outline of the insect accent an otherwise wholly abstract composition. For James, the dragonfly—a symbol of change—is integral to her description of time's passage and the essence of memory. It helps remind us "that we are small and predictable creatures."



Dana James, Dragonfly II (2019), Oil, dye, encaustic, pigment on canvas, 48 by 52 inches. Photo courtesy of Abby Ballin

In their practices, both artists dance a line between abstraction and representation. On one side of this line, James captures the abstract by deconstructing her materials into discrete elements and reforming them into new compositions. These new forms channel her process: the autonomous path of poured paint and the wild lines of anxious scribbling both lend insight into her approach. Mitty, meanwhile, conveys direct narratives through bold, cohesive,

representational depictions of gazebos and lush English gardens. They hearken a sadness, a decadence, and “the cyclical nature and mutability of things in times of excess.”

For “The Thread,” James has largely absconded with her trademark cobalt hues, which she had characteristically used to evoke depth and the perception of water. Water, like an agent of time, suggests the evolution of memory and how we may recall something mundane like a swimming pool as if standing on a cliff, looking out over it at the wide ocean below. In works like “Fools Rush In” (2019), James instead favors a spectrum of fair pinks to create a vast, ethereal backdrop; and the notion of memory, once at the core of her intent, has given way to a visual exploration of time and the essence of change.



Dana James, Fools Rush In (2019), Oil, ink, pigment, acrylic, charcoal on canvas, 80 by 110 inches. Photo courtesy of Abby Ballin

From her renewed intent emerges works like “Can I Be an Indian Princess,” in which strips of canvas sewn into the painting delineate time as it moves linearly, along a straight line, from left to right; the fabric is both new and used, and serves to root the narrative in various points in history. Then, in a very purposeful contradiction of form and narrative, we discern the wings of the dragonfly, the symbol of change. The autonomous path of the poured paint plus the anxious scribbling reinforce this contradiction, reminding us that, along a predictable and unerring timeline, things are not static. It’s a “compilation of histories”, situating the immutable and mutable; time itself can be quantified, but what happens along the way is unpredictable, disruptive. And the very personal meaning behind the title of the painting—in fact a reference to the artist’s recollection of childhood and imaginative play—describes the translation of time into memory for the individual.



Dana James, Can I be an Indian Princess (Sprinter Set) (2019), Oil, ink, pigment, charcoal on sewn canvas, 22 by 10 inches each. Photo courtesy of the artist

In comparison, Mitty's work veers more toward the representational. According to the artist, she finds beauty in the “deteriorating and overlooked corners of urban architecture and interiors”—as in her grief-stirring, decadent floor-to-ceiling chandeliers. In these pieces, the chandelier consumes the entire height and breadth of the canvas; every single aspect of the composition is dedicated to this single object. This decontextualization of form inspires in the viewer a sense of hollowness, a sense of loss. And the depiction, though reflecting certain aspects of abstraction, is at the same time grotesquely intricate, wherein every single last piece of the chandelier is accounted for and is perfectly situated in relation to the others. This detail renders the work haunting, as if a period of hope and elegance long ago gave way to something more forlorn, almost sinister—and it likely was not by choice.

For “The Thread,” however, Mitty has shifted her focus to somewhat less terrifying depictions, framing her paintings with gates and gazebos that invite the viewer to step inside, as in “Summersweet” (2018). The object depicted consumes the entire floor-to-ceiling canvas, seeming almost to spill out onto the physical wall upon which it hangs. It conjures the sense of being able to walk into the painting as if it were real; the archway, the open door, the blossoming flowers all suggest an entrance, beckoning the viewer to step through. Yet there remains something menacing about it, as if askew: there is nothing behind the gazebo—nothing except an empty expanse rendered flat in a slightly somber hue. The viewer is intrigued, unsettled, and eternally ambivalent about stepping into the painting.



*Lizbeth Mitty, Deauville (2018), oil on canvas, 84 by 48 inches.
Photo courtesy of Abby Ballin*



Lizbeth Mitty,, Summersweet (2018), oil on canvas, 72 by 60 inches. Photo courtesy of Abby Ballin

For both artists, process is evident in their works. For James, the final piece describes her process: from sewing the strips, to scribbling the lines, to pouring the paint. Form is incidental, and tells a story, i.e., how the painting came into existence; Mitty's work, meanwhile, features one bold image, which, when examined up close, betrays her own process: the layers, the scratches, the relief of squeezed paint. Mitty uses markings to create the subject; James's markings are the subject.

All abstract work comes from something, some concrete image, Mitty explained. For she and James, that image is a landscape. And in her daughter's work, the mother perceives a graceful figure—James herself—moving through the space, as if she were part of that very landscape from which the work derived.