

JUANITA MCNEELY

Selected Press

VOGUE

ARTS

In Juanita McNeely's Searing Paintings, Beauty and Pain Commingle

BY GRACE EDQUIST

September 8, 2023



Juanita McNeely. Panel 8 of *Moving Through*, 1975. Oil on linen, 84 x 68 x 2 inches. Courtesy of James Fuentes.

It can be hard to look at unpleasant things. Blood, violence, sickness, pain: Who needs it? The world is brutal enough as it is.

But to Juanita McNeely, the 87-year-old artist whose life dealt her an unfair share of hardship, shying away from the taboo was never an option. For more than half a century she has rendered the vicissitudes of her life, gore and all. “I’m a painter,” McNeely told me recently from her studio in the Westbeth Artists Housing complex in Manhattan, where she has lived since the 1970s. “That’s what I am; that’s what I do.”

Her work is often gruesome, primal, erotic. She captures her own struggles: bouts with cancer, a harrowing abortion in the 1960s, and a spinal cord injury that largely confined her to a wheelchair. Her whole approach to art speaks to the idea that these were things that she—and other women—experienced, and that visualizing life’s discomforts and anguish is powerful, and necessary. Though much of the content is drawn from her life, she is channeling a universal pain, and resilience.

Today, three of McNeely’s works from the 1970s will go on view in Los Angeles. “[Juanita McNeely: Moving Through](#),” at James Fuentes’s new gallery space on Melrose Avenue, features large-scale, multi-panel paintings that combine McNeely’s striking depiction of naked bodies—suspended, contorted, kicking, careening—with her exacting use of color.



Juanita McNeely. Panel 2 of *Moving Through*, 1975. Oil on linen, 84 x 72 x 2 inches. Courtesy of James Fuentes.

In the eponymous piece *Moving Through*, from 1975, nine panels are lined up horizontally, like stills from a movie. As she often does, McNeely includes teeth-bearing animals in several of the panels. Taken together, it's an unflinching expression of rage in the face of a society that doesn't often show women the care they deserve.

From the Black Space I (1976) and *From the Black Space II* (1977), the show's other two works, eschew background color and detail to let her nude figures stand alone. No less bold, the panels in these works practically burst with feeling: limbs stretch, backs arch, heads howl. The musculature is breathtaking—especially impressive considering McNeely gave up working with models and photographs back in art school, preferring instead to work “from my mind,” as she told me, pointing to her temple.



Juanita McNeely, Panel 4 of *From the Black Space II*, 1977. Oil on linen, 84 x 72 x 2 inches. Courtesy of James Fuentes. Juanita McNeely, Panel 6 of *From the Black Space II*, 1977. Oil on linen, 84 x 72 x 2 inches. Courtesy of James Fuentes.

Juanita McNeely was born in St. Louis in 1936. As Sharyn M. Finnegan recounts in her [essay on McNeely](#), from the fall/winter 2011 issue of *Woman's Art Journal*, McNeely had an early calling to art—at 15, she won a scholarship for an oil painting. But this coincided with the beginning of her health troubles. She missed a year of high school when she was hospitalized for excessive bleeding. (Blood factors heavily in McNeely's work in part because she was around it so much, and it just seemed like a normal part of life.)

She attended the St. Louis School of Fine Arts at Washington University, where she studied under Werner Drewes, the German expatriate credited with introducing principles of the Bauhaus school to Americans. A cancer diagnosis in her first year of college came with a grim prognosis: only three to six months to live. Per her doctor's orders, she filled that time doing what she loved: studying art. She beat the odds, and told Finnegan: “That was the beginning of what really formed me as someone who spoke about the things that are not necessarily pleasant, on canvas, things that perhaps most people even feel uncomfortable about looking at, much less talking about.”



Juanita McNeely. *Tagged*, 2014. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of James Fuentes.

McNeely went on to graduate school at Southern Illinois University before moving to Chicago, where she taught at the Art Institute while showing her own work. But New York City beckoned, and in 1967, she decamped from the Midwest to the East Village. McNeely found community with fellow feminist artists in New York, joining groups like Women Artists in Revolution, Redstockings, and Fight Censorship, an organization started by Anita Steckel that included Louise Bourgeois, Joan Semmel, and Hannah Wilke. (Semmel, age 90, McNeely's best friend and fellow unabashed painter of nude bodies, just opened a show at Alexander Gray in New York, concurrent with McNeely's show in LA.)

Not long after she moved to New York, McNeely's cancer returned, and an attempt to remove a tumor led doctors to discover she was pregnant. This being pre-*Roe v. Wade*, abortions were illegal. Thus began a distressing process of doctors, mostly men, trying to figure out what to do with her. She eventually got the abortion she needed to save her life, but it wasn't without physical and emotional repercussions.

McNeely's 1969 work *Is It Real? Yes, It Is!* documents this experience. The epic nine-panel work—so brutal it will bowl you over—was acquired by the Whitney Museum of American Art last year. “There was nothing else in the collection that dealt with abortion in such a head-on way,” says Jane Panetta, a curator at the Whitney. “It’s such a singular piece: the frank sensibility, the fearlessness of it.... It’s unbelievable to think that she made it in 1969.”

In *Is It Real? Yes, It Is!*, as in many of her fervent works, McNeely uses color—lush purples and almost sickly greens, burning scarlets and piercing blues—as a way into what is otherwise quite difficult subject matter. But color is just as much a signature in her other paintings. She made lively portraits of friends and loved ones, including Jeremy, her husband, a sculptor in his own right.



The world is catching up to Juanita McNeely. There was a survey at Brandeis University’s Women’s Study Research Center in 2014. Solo shows at the Mitchell Albus and James Fuentes galleries in New York followed, as did group shows and appearances at Art Basel Miami in 2020 and Independent 20th Century in 2022. *Is It Real?*’s new home on the seventh floor of the Whitney surely means more people will learn about her.

Perhaps others, like me, are finding her work worthy of attention not despite its intensity, but because of it. There’s something to be said about taking in work that makes you uncomfortable, that makes you wrinkle your nose, cock your head, let out a sigh. My visit with McNeely was brief, but I couldn’t stop thinking about how someone who has been through such traumatic experiences, who has excised her own agony onto canvas, could be so charming and cheerful in person.

But then her mantra reminded me: “I’m a painter. That’s what I do.” She has made beautiful art out of pain, calling attention to the grave disservice done onto women when it comes to reproductive and medical care. She made us look at things we might rather pretend aren’t...*real*. But there’s humanity in revealing the grotesque, in telling the truth about the world.

“Juanita McNeely: Moving Through” is open from September 8 to October 14 at James Fuentes, 5015 Melrose Ave., in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles Times

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Juanita McNeely bares it all in her debut L.A. solo show



Juanita McNeely, "From the Black Space II, Panel 6," 1976. (Juanita McNeely / James Fuentes)

BY STEVEN VARGAS, LOS ANGELES TIMES STAFF

SEPT. 7, 2023 9:18 AM PT

Weekly Countdown



Juanita McNeely, "Moving Through, Panel 2," 1975. (Juanita McNeely / James Fuentes)

1. 'Juanita McNeely: Moving Through'

James Fuentes presents **McNeely's** debut solo exhibition in Los Angeles, "**Moving Through**." The show centers on three large-scale, multi-panel paintings: "**Moving Through**," "**From the Blank Space I**" and "**From the Blank Space II**." McNeely's work is autobiographical, chronicling her experience with cancer and an illegal abortion before **Roe vs. Wade**. The paintings, which she made throughout the 1970s, show visceral imagery of contorted bodies, wounds and gauze covering up bloody and broken limbs.

“That’s my pain, that’s what you’re looking at,” she told The Times.

Her work is shown across three cities; the other exhibitions are at the **Whitney** in New York and at the **Rubell Museum** in Washington, D.C. McNeely shares her cancer experience, placing bodies in the confines of hospital spaces, in the series “From the Blank Space.”

Her depictions of an illegal abortion are a testament to her uncensored and unapologetic storytelling. McNeely calls on people to “be awake” and pay attention to the ways the government controls individual agency.

“They’re letting their eyes close and letting themselves slip by the reality that is happening to other people,” she said.

“Moving Through” is on display **Friday** through **Oct. 14**. The gallery is **free**, and more details can be found on [James Fuentes’ website](#).

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Juanita McNeely's Paintings Bare Pain and Resilience In Equal Measure

Looking at McNeely's work through the lens of pain is almost inevitable, but it was a feat of strength for McNeely to paint some of these canvases at all, as doctors insisted she would never work at such a scale again.



Valentina Di Liscia February 25, 2020



Juanita McNeely, "Is It Real? Yes, It Is!" (1969) (all images courtesy of James Fuentes Gallery)

Juanita McNeely's works illustrate the life of a woman whose body betrayed her from an early age. In her paintings, currently on view at James Fuentes Gallery, McNeely's torment is palpable in blinding fluorescent hellscapes; her physical pain pulses vigorously through the twisted limbs of wrung figures, strapped-in and tied down, as crows peck at formless masses.

But these are also portraits of a woman whose body sustained her. McNeely's strength pours in from the glimpses of blue and yellow that punctuate her figurations like skylights. Her resilience cuts through the misery with beauty and even humor: an absurdly enlarged organ; a buckled horse with an awkward gallop.

Organized in collaboration with Mitchell Albus, *Juanita McNeely* presents two massive, multi-panel works that bridge nearly two decades of the artist's life. "Is It Real? Yes, It Is!" (1969) chronicles McNeely's nightmarish experience with abortion, before *Roe v. Wade* decriminalized the procedure. (McNeely discovered she was pregnant while at the hospital for a tumor that required surgery, which made doctors reluctant to treat her.) She rendered bodies wrangled, bound, and confined in coarse black outlines.

The 13-panel work "Triskaidekaptych" (1986) was painted nearly 20 years later, after McNeely suffered a fall that damaged her spinal cord. She shed her heavy outlining in favor of a diverse range of approaches. Meticulous networks of line and form coexist with spasmodic explosions of color. While some images are direct, clear, and explicit — a close-up of a roaring gorilla — others are geometricized and fragmented, jumbling our sense of figure and ground and conveying an unsteady vertigo.

The episodes McNeely paints are harrowing, but her work also makes me think of the routine moments of discomfort women experience every day. It takes me back to my feet in cold stirrups, legs sprawled, as I'm told there isn't enough research on chronic fatigue syndrome yet — one of the many conditions that likely remain enigmatic because they disproportionately affect women.

Looking at McNeely's work through the lens of pain is almost inevitable — physical suffering literally constitutes her subject matter. But it was a feat of strength for McNeely to paint some of these canvases at all, as doctors insisted she would never work at such a scale again. These two women — the one who agonizes and the one who persists — are one and the same, and they create a rare tension that makes for thrilling painting.

Juanita McNeely continues through March 1 at James Fuentes (55 Delancey Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan)

The Best Booths at Independent 20th Century, From Surrealist Visions to Powerful Scenes Confronting Trauma



BY **TESSA SOLOMON**  September 10, 2022 2:17pm

Independent 20th Century—the newest venture from the Independent art fair—makes a compelling argument that the typical fair set-up, a multi-story sprawl of the art historical canon, needs rethinking. There are just 32 booths featuring famous and unfamiliar 20th-century artists. It unfolds over a single floor of the Battery Maritime Building, steps from the Staten Island Ferry send-off. It's intimate and tightly curated, and a blessed departure from **Spring/Break** and the **Armory Show**, which both opened this week.

The baseline of quality here is high, chock-full of highlights, and many galleries matched the unusual circumstances with ambitious offerings. Below, a look at six stellar artists getting their due there.

1 **Juanita McNeely at James Fuentes**



Photo : Courtesy of James Fuentes, New York

Perhaps the most splendid display in the fair is the first encountered: boldly colored figurative works which bend toward the surreal. This is a solo presentation of American feminist painter Juanita McNeely, who calls to mind the symbolic figuration of Frida Kahlo and Paula Rego. These women are twisted, elongated, sensual but searching for more than a bedmate—there's a palpable desire for connection that's met in many canvases by violence. Some of her subjects bear bite wounds from birds and dogs, some of which bark and wrestle—play?—at her feet. She's an animal too, crouched, naked, and feral, and brandishing phallic-like forms as trophies. The last impression is one of bright crimson blood, gushing from wounds and orifices. It's thrilling to imagine a whole fair subsumed by this energy.

[excerpted]

Art Fairs

Here Are 7 Artists Who Stood Out at Independent's 20th-Century Fair, From a Texas Modernist to a Pioneering Graffiti Artist

The fair's stated aim is to make room for artists who have been under-appreciated in their lifetimes, or whose contributions have been undeservedly forgotten.

Sarah Cascone, September 9, 2022

When the Independent Art Fair announced that it was launching a dedicated 20th-century art edition to run during New York Armory Week, the pitch was simple. This was a chance to revisit the art historical canon as we know it, to make room for artists who had been under-appreciated in their lifetimes, or whose contributions had been undeservedly forgotten—as well as take a new look at established masters and lesser-known facets of their careers.

What that looked like in reality was somewhat surprising. Of the fair's 32 exhibitors, only four dedicated their booths to solo presentations of female artists, and 10 to artists of color—none of whom were women. Of the single- or dual-artist presentations, just 14 percent were women, and 37 percent were artists of color.

Factoring in group presentations, the final tally, by Artnet News's count, was 65 male artists to just 14 women, or less than 18 percent. So much for rewriting the canon. (We did not do a gender breakdown for Specific Object at Susan Inglett Gallery, which presented a wide variety of 1960s-era artist ephemera.)

But though more diversity would have been appreciated, the lack of it didn't mean there wasn't some stunning art on display. Here's a look at our selection of the must-see art at the inaugural Independent 20th Century, from rare work by a famed Surrealist to original drawings by a pioneering graffiti artist—plus all four women on view at the fair. Hopefully, next time there will be more of them.

Juanita McNeely



Juanita McNeely, *Woman's Psyche* 1968). Photo: courtesy James Fuentes, New York.

Booth: James Fuentes, New York

What It Costs: Single panel paintings from \$80,000, multi-panel panels \$100,000–\$300,000

What You Should Know: Now age 86, Juanita McNeely was born in St. Louis, but has lived in New York City since 1967, when she became one of the first residents of Westbeth Artists Housing, where she lives to this day.

The large-scale, multi-panel works James Fuentes is showing at the fair all came straight from the artist's apartment. (The gallery is also currently staging a solo show of the artist's work at its soon-to-be renovated 52 White Street space through September 30.)

"She kept all this work at home and lived with it—many works have never been exhibited," Katrin Lewinsky, the gallery's senior director, told Artnet News.

It's not hard to guess why. McNeely was diagnosed with cancer as a young woman after suffering excessive bleeding, and had multiple operations on tumors, as well as an abortion. These intense bodily events play out on her canvases, where menstruation, birth, and female genitalia are depicted with fleshy abandon.

"She was painting experiences that dealt with the existentialist experiences that she survived," Lewinsky said.

Now in poor health, McNeely has painted tirelessly for decades, even when opportunities to exhibit her work dried up. And despite numerous gallery and university shows, a museum exhibition has never materialized—something that Fuentes hopes can be rectified in the artist’s lifetime.

“There’s an audience for her work who immediately understands its importance and her talent,” Lewinsky said. “She’s really a feminist artist.”

[excerpted]

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Independent 20th Century and the Armory Show—Conflicting Visions

In New York, two art fairs go in different directions; one tightly focused on expanding the canon, the other unfortunately bloated.

By Brian P. Kelly

Sept. 9, 2022 6:21 pm ET

A year ago, the art-fair circuit was focusing on post-COVID-19 survival and recovery. Today, its attention is on what the future of fairs might look like. At the start of this month, Frieze Seoul launched, and there is a growing list of first-time ventures on the horizon, including new fairs coming to Tokyo, Singapore and, next month, Paris.

This year's Armory Week—that time when the marquee Armory Show and numerous satellite fairs, pop-ups and openings overrun New York—provides another lens on the way the art world is working to define its new normal, with two highly watched fairs offering changes big and small that might point the way forward.

At the tip of Manhattan, **Independent 20th Century** is a new program from the Independent Art Fair, the event that, since being established in 2010, has remained the most interesting and adventurous of its kind in the U.S. Located in a stunning, recently restored Beaux-Arts space at the Battery Maritime Building, it includes about 30 exhibitors and aims to highlight artists from 1900 to 2000 who have been overlooked and, in doing so, to expand the canon. The show offers many discoveries, elevating some names that visitors might have already heard while also bringing to light powerful art by complete unknowns.



Juanita McNeely's 'Willow' (1979)

PHOTO: JAMES FUENTES

The most powerful works here are Juanita McNeely's shocking, large-scale paintings being presented by James Fuentes. While Max Beckmann comes to mind standing in front of her canvases, Ms. McNeely (b. 1936) draws most clearly from the visual language of Francis Bacon. But if Bacon was preoccupied with the horrors of mankind, Ms. McNeely focuses on the horrors of womankind. These unapologetically feminist works are filled with contorted nudes, flowing blood and savage dogs. Harrowing is a word that gets applied to too much art, but here it's fully warranted. While certainly not for the squeamish, these visceral images, made in the '60s,'70s and '90s, are not to be missed.

[excerpted]

Washington, D.C.'s New Rubell Museum Offers a Bracing Vision of Contemporary Art Right Now



BY MAXIMILIANO DURÓN  November 3, 2022 5:00am



Juanita McNeely, *Woman's Psyche*, 1968.

MAXIMILIANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

Similarly, when the Rubells were in New York in September for the Armory Show, they saw Juanita McNeely's four-panel *Woman's Psyche* (1968), created five years before abortion became legal in the U.S. with the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*. In one panel, a woman gives birth to a blue fetus. In pain, she grasps onto two phallic-like objects.

Since the Supreme Court's decision this past June in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overturned the constitutional right to a legal abortion, McNeely's work has taken on new poignancy. Mera said that the choice to exhibit the piece was "handed to us on a silver platter."

The Rubells are among the most prodigious collectors in the country—they've ranked on each edition of the **ARTnews Top 200 Collectors list** since 1993—and they have long been known for spotting talent and supporting emerging artists long before they get wider recognition. While there might some skepticism around the need for another private museum for a collector to show off their holdings, particularly in Washington, D.C., what the Rubell Museum represents is something more personal than just another contemporary art institution. Instead, it's a love letter to the artists they collect and to the city of D.C.

The collectors have no ambition other than to show the art they have been collecting since 1964. Their approach since then has been "artist-first, always," as Mera put it. Now, she's hoping that showing these artists will put them on the track toward greater recognition in a city with some of the country's best museums.

"It's an out of body experience because it is *D.C.*—it's a little intimidating," Mera said. "People really expect us to do something important here. We didn't realize how hungry the community was for something like this, but there's so much desire to bring a vitality here."

[excerpted]

After Decades of Silence, Art About Abortion (Cautiously) Enters the Establishment

An art taboo is falling, from the Whitney Museum to the Armory Show to blue-chip galleries. Yet artists acknowledge self-censorship on the topic.



By **Deborah Solomon**

Published Sept. 10, 2022 Updated Sept. 11, 2022

In recent years, a fashion for painting the human figure has preoccupied the art world, with an emphasis on race, gender and other urgent social issues. Yet another pressing topic in America has been curiously absent from art: abortion, which became all the more timely when the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in June.

Depictions of abortion are still rare in the art-history canon. Check the walls of museums and flip through the pages of H.W. Janson or other art textbooks, and you are likely to encounter countless images of beatific mothers, dimpled infants and a world in which pregnancies are not terminated.

But the subject of abortion, which historically was shrouded in shame and relegated to the realm of unspeakable secrets, has lately been gaining visibility in the art world. The change owes something to a mix of museum officials, blue-chip galleries, art fair administrators and young artists who grew up at a time when art that explored personal identity moved from the cultural fringe into the mainstream.

For 90 years of its existence, the Whitney Museum of American Art did not own a single painting that explicitly deals with abortion. But that has changed. The museum recently purchased [Juanita McNeely's](#) "Is it Real? Yes It Is!" (1969), a mural-sized painting that recounts, in a fragmented narrative spanning nine separate panels, her harrowing experience of having an abortion in the early '60s, when the procedure was illegal. The painting will make its museum debut on Sept. 20, when the Whitney rehangs its permanent collection.

Last weekend, the best place in New York to contemplate abortion-themed art was the lobby of the [Armory Show](#), that annual fair whose thronged aisles of art shoppers can make Bloomingdale's seem like an oasis of calm. It opened on Friday at the Javits Center, on an uncharacteristic note of feminist advocacy, thanks to a loan of 10 etchings that reprise [Paula Rego's now-historic "Abortion Series" \(1998-99\)](#) from the Cristea Roberts Gallery in London.

The series consists of large-scale pastels that show women in the midst of self-induced, at-home abortions. They lie in rumpled beds or crouch in corners, amid towels and bowls and metal pails, cast off by a medical establishment unwilling to help them. As graphic as all this might sound, Rego, a celebrated Portuguese artist [who died in June, at age 87](#), purged her images of potentially harsh bodily details. Her female figures remain clothed, and they tend to be shown from the side — they come across as daunting individuals with willful expressions and thickly muscled runner’s legs. “I tried to do full frontal,” she once said, “but I didn’t want to show blood, gore or anything to sicken, because people don’t look at it then. And what you want to do is make people look.”

Despite such instances of social protest, the issue of female reproductive rights has yet to receive the sustained attention that the art world has lavished on climate change and mass incarceration, among other timely issues. But then, abortion is a singularly discomfiting topic, not just among art institutions, but even among artists, a famously liberal bunch who overwhelmingly support legalized abortion. In recent interviews with female painters and sculptors, I noticed a basic tension between their sense of outrage over the dismantling of Roe and a caution about adopting the subject for their art. Art about abortion, some women say, risks becoming lurid, overly intimate, or politically naïve, converting sensibility into a slogan, and turning advocacy into a turnoff, which may partly explain the dearth of art on the subject.

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the director, Max Hollein, who oversees a collection of 1.5 million objects, said he could not think of any art about abortion “off the top of my head.” But he would welcome the chance to look at art that “comes out of this moment.” He cautioned against expecting quick results. “At the end of the day, art is not journalism, and museums are not a daily medium that can respond in a timely manner.”

At the Brooklyn Museum, [Anne Pasternak](#), the director, also referring to a collection that goes back to antiquity, said: “We have 150,000 objects in the collection, and I can’t think of one specifically about abortion.”

But in a spirit of advocacy, she emailed museum members on June 24, the day of the overturn of Roe v. Wade, warning that “we are facing a relentless assault on human dignity.” And curators are in early talks with the artists Jenny Holzer and Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter about staging “activations” at the museum in January to honor the 50th anniversary of the Roe v. Wade decision by the Supreme Court.

Art about abortion is infinitely varied, shifting between Rego-style political activism at one extreme and raw self-exposure at the other. At the helm of the confessional mode is Frida Kahlo, the brilliant Mexican modernist who invented the tradition of visual oversharing. In the process, she legitimized female trauma as a subject for art.



Juanita McNeely, "Is it Real? Yes It Is!" from 1969, a series of nine panels about the painter's illegal abortion and medical emergency, will be making its museum debut when it is shown at the Whitney Museum starting this month. Whitney Museum of American Art

McNeely, the artist whose painting was acquired by the Whitney Museum, can be said to belong to Kahlo's lineage of art-as-autobiography. Her "Is It Real? Yes It Is!" adopts an angled, expressionist style to chronicle a medical emergency that left her bleeding profusely and in critical condition before she found a doctor willing to disregard the law and perform an abortion that she believes saved her life.

Now 86, McNeely, who has lived for nearly a half-century in a studio in Westbeth, the artists' housing complex in the West Village, was in high spirits when I visited her the other day. The Whitney purchase came as a great surprise, especially since her repeated efforts to exhibit the painting at a gallery were rejected until last year, when she was given a solo show at the James Fuentes Gallery. She attributes her decades of professional obscurity to a societal aversion to contemplating female trauma. "I had done a lot of paintings with blood," she recalled. "I was big on blood. The more blood the better."

Was she concerned about the potentially off-putting aspects of depicting an abortion.? "You wouldn't be alive without your blood," she countered cheerfully.

[excerpted]

The New York Times

ART REVIEWS

What to See Right Now in New York Art Galleries

Katherine Bernhardt's E.T. paintings; Michael Rakowitz's reconstructions of antiquities; and Juanita McNeely's contorted female figures.

Jan. 29, 2020 Updated 2:41 p.m. ET



Juanita McNeely



A panel from "Triskaidekptych," by Juanita McNeely. Juanita McNeely and James Fuentes, New York

Through March 1. James Fuentes Gallery, 55 Delancey Street, Manhattan; 212-577-1201, jamesfuentes.com.

What if Max Beckmann had made a painting about illegal abortion? He might have produced something like Juanita McNeely's 1969 "[Is It Real? Yes It Is](#)," a magnificent nine-panel installation showing now at James Fuentes Gallery in collaboration with Mitchell Albus. A squatting skeleton, pinioned women with buckled knees and crows picking the flesh from a prone female body are all rendered with Beckmann's crashing color scheme and Expressionist urgency. But they don't come across as allegories — they look like facts. In the central canvas, a hand holding glittering silver forceps reaches toward a woman's naked crotch under an oversize Donald Duck toy. Altogether it's a searing evocation of the fractured way we remember traumatic experiences — and of the many bloody realities most people prefer not to look at.

In 1985, after an accident put Ms. McNeely in a wheelchair, a doctor told her she'd never make another large painting. She responded with "Triskaidekptych," which comprises 13 substantial canvases parading edge to edge around two full walls of the gallery. Contorted female figures are still here, along with torture, medical horror and a screaming baboon's face. But the introduction of softer blues and pinks, and of a cloudiness in the way those colors are applied, changes the tone, and these writhing figures could very well be dancing. Two faceless women on trapezes, swinging through banks of mirrors, add a heavy note of self-consciousness: If "Is it real" is the moment of trauma, in all its kaleidoscopic brutality, "Triskaidekptych" is the elaborate mental process a person goes through to make sense of it.

WILL HEINRICH