Artifacts | Cats, the New Rulers of the Art World

CULTURE | By LINDA YABLONSKY

When it comes to art, cats are like the second sex. What is the feline equivalent of Jeff Koons’s giant flowering “Puppy?” Where is the painting of a snarling tabby to counter Francis Bacon’s feral mutt? Are fluffy cats not worthy of the same serious treatment as Edwin Landseer’s regal hounds or David Hockney’s beloved pooches? Who is the William Wegman of the whisker set?

At long last, a correction is upon us. You can hear it in the piercing meows that emanate from one of the artworks at “The Cat Show,” a no-claws-barred group exhibition at the nonprofit White Columns gallery. And you can see it in more than 50 examples of cat portraiture executed in every possible medium (including the holographic) by artists that include both heavy hitters like Andy Warhol, Richard Prince and Elizabeth Peyton and lesser-known but notable talents like the aptly named Siobhan Meow, a transvestite whose work incorporates her own pets’ feces, and John Hiltunen, a mentally disabled artist who makes priceless collages of cats as fashion plates.

Organized by the art critic and self-professed cat lady Rhonda Lieberman with the White Columns director Matthew Higgs, the show handily elevates kitty art above kitsch, while also pulling heartstrings. The entryway displays mug shots of adorable pets whose owners have died or abandoned them. They were not originally intended
as works of art. They’re culled from a 2007 public service campaign by Animal Care & Control of New York City, there to signal Lieberman’s not-so-secret ulterior motive, which is to save forgotten pets from being euthanized.

Lieberman’s heart is in the ingenious, art-appointed cat habitat at the center of the gallery, designed by the Freecell architects John Hartman and Lauren Crahan with Gia Wolff. On weekends during the run of the show, live kittens up for adoption from Social Tees Animal Rescue pull on a dangling calico mobile by the sculptor Lucky DeBellvue, climb into a colossal litter box by Rob Pruitt, lie on cat mats by Ruth Root and scratch at palettes constructed by the artist Joe Scanlan with vintage, limited-edition geometric carpeting by Gerhard Richter. (These and the other works in the habitat are for sale to benefit the rescue group.)

“The original idea for the show was really only the habitat, to create a place for the cats to hang out,” said Lieberman, who is currently “holding steady” with just two cats at home. “Matthew wanted to have more pictorial things that weren’t necessarily just for cats, so the show got very aesthetic, but it’s really more of a social sculpture that uses art as a conduit for rescue.”

It works. The Warhol, a line drawing from the 1950s, depicts cat fur as if it were curled and mascaraed eyelashes. Prince’s collage features a pulp book cover with a bablexious pinup. A suite of watercolors by Ann Craven catches a litter of kittens seemingly at birth. A photograph of a spectacular white Persian by Michele Abeles hangs beside “the last picture” that Eileen Quinlan took of her aging black tabby. Magdalena Frimkess’s striped ceramic cat adds a touch of folk art genius. Frances Stark seems to have spent much of the last 15 years making videos of the cat in her studio. The filmmaker Gus Van Zant did the same, with guitar accompaniment, in a 1989 home movie. Cory Arcangel mashes up YouTube videos of cats creditably tickling the ivories of their owners’ pianos. Mark Lecky soulfully captures the spirit of the enterprise with an animated cat tail that wags with the hypnotic rhythm of a metronome.

“I’ve been trying to make this happen since 1999,” Lieberman said. “It’s a huge saga, kind of poignant now.” And, as she likes to say, kind of purr-fect.