

Alexandra Metcalf: Vol.18

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By Barry Schwabsky

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Installation view: *Alexandra Metcalf: Vol. 18*, 15 Orient, Brooklyn, 2023. Courtesy 15 Orient.

On View

15 Orient

March 16–April 23, 2023

New York

The unyielding strangeness of Alexandra Metcalf's visual imagination might lead the viewer to demand thematic resolution. Certainly the seventeen works in her recent New York solo debut, *Vol. 18*, offered any number of clues that might have tempted one to construct an interpretation. And yet one could only wonder whether trying to find the work's *raison d'être* in its discursive layer was not to be—however beguilingly—misled.



Alexandra Metcalf, *Remastered Historical Recording 4*, 2023, Glass UV print, nylon, wooden canes, aluminum, steel, hardware, 81 x 64 x 3 inches. Courtesy the artist and 15 Orient.

The works on view, all made this year, included sculpture, painting, and hybrid works that might as well be called assemblage. Even the paintings had an aspect of “builtness,” if only through the simple wooden frames that the artist had made for them; applying oil to canvas was only one episode in the overall process. In many of the ten mostly small paintings on view, dark and overcast skies, conjured with considerable subtlety and variety, evoke stormy and crepuscular moods. Into all but two of them, a small, close-cropped photographic image (or sometimes more than one such image) of a woman’s head has been inserted; the gallery checklist referred to the technique by which this was

done as decoupage—a fact I mention because it's unclear to me what's involved by using this term rather than *collage*. I can only imagine that it has to do with the artist's wish to ally her practice with decorative craft as much as with the fine art tradition that has given collage an honored place for more than a century now. In each case, it's the same woman's face that's been placed into the cloudy composition, but always differently pictured: her eyes are sometimes closed in what might be rapture, sometimes wide with excitement—but her mouth is usually open. It's a face that was once familiar around the world, though people of Metcalf's own generation (she was born, in London, in 1992) might not recognize her: the prima donna of prima donnas, a singer as famous for her tempestuous life as for the dramatic intensity of her art, Maria Callas. In a few of the paintings, Callas's head is joined by that of a child, usually a crying infant. Callas's child? Some have claimed that with Aristotle Onassis she bore a son who died immediately upon birth, but this has never been proven. On the other hand, the diva's conflicts with her own mother are well-known; the child might be another avatar of Callas herself. In any case, infancy was among the show's recurrent themes. The largest works on view were a couple of sculptures of cribs atop long wooden legs each meeting the floor with a hook-like turn. While *Crib 1* stands above human height, the shorter legs of *Crib 2* resemble walking canes, two of which have been broken and set at right angles, so that the sculpture kneels down to the viewer.

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Installation view: *Alexandra Metcalf: Vol. 18, 15 Orient*, Brooklyn, 2023. Courtesy 15 Orient.

The crib sculptures inevitably recall Robert Gober's works using the same motif in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Like Gober's, Metcalf's cribs are mutants; and as with Charles Ray's *Family Romance*, 1993—in which grown-ups and toddlers are eerily the same size—they remind us that the disproportion in emotional scale between parents and children is not always to the elders' advantage. And yet my intuition is that the psychosocial freight that Metcalf's works bear functions more as the vehicle than the tenor of her formal inventions. I take my cue from the three large-scale wall-mounted assemblages *Remastered Historical Recording 1, 3, and 4*, which figure oversized replicas of Callas CDs as bodies of butterflies (whose antennae are wooden canes recalling the legs of the crib sculptures). The butterfly being a symbol of the soul, but also of transformation, reminds us that infancy and maturity are relative terms; the child is the mother to the woman, and Callas is not only the vocal genius whose career nonetheless suffered a premature decline, but an enduring inspiration to many. In that sense, the tinge of irony that colors much of Metcalf's art is merely an element in its acknowledgement of the metamorphic character of art itself.

Barry Schwabsky is art critic for *The Nation*.