HYPERALLERGIC

POCKET REVIEW

Rebecca Ness Stakes Her Claim to Art History

Reinterpreting canonical works is nothing new, but her work shines when it's most personal.



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Inheritance makes me think of money. Handing down heirlooms after a loved one passes, or being next in line for the deed to the family house. A one-way street, an open-and-shut door. But to Rebecca Ness, inheritance is akin to transformation: taking something old and making it new. Her latest show explores this by revisiting and updating historical paintings in contemporary contexts. Here she proclaims that all of art history belongs as much to her as to anyone else.

In *Inheritance,* Manet's "A Bar at the Folies Bergère" (1882) becomes a crowded and sweaty scene at the West Village lesbian institution Cubbyhole. The 19th-century *trompe l'oeil* board paintings by William Harnett and John F. Peto are updated on a corkboard with cut-out and crumpled pages from art history textbooks and photos of the artist, a Pinterest board brought to life.



While much of the show feels slightly repetitive (so many contemporary artists work in this vein that it doesn't feel like Ness is saying anything wildly new), the work "Abe's winning punch" (2026) shines. Based on George Bellows's "Dempsey and Firpo" (1923–24), Ness substitutes the American boxer Jack Dempsey with her own ancestor, an amateur Jewish boxer who lived in the Lower East Side in the 1920s, throwing the winning blow. This work achieves what the others don't, through its specificity and personal touches. It comes full circle, back to a new type of currency of inheritance, one that is not what is handed down to us but what we choose to carry forward and make our own.

Rebecca Ness: Inheritance *continues at Morgan Presents (537 West 27th Street, Chelsea, New York City) through October 20. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*