

Claudia Hart: *The Ruins*

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By Charlotte Kent

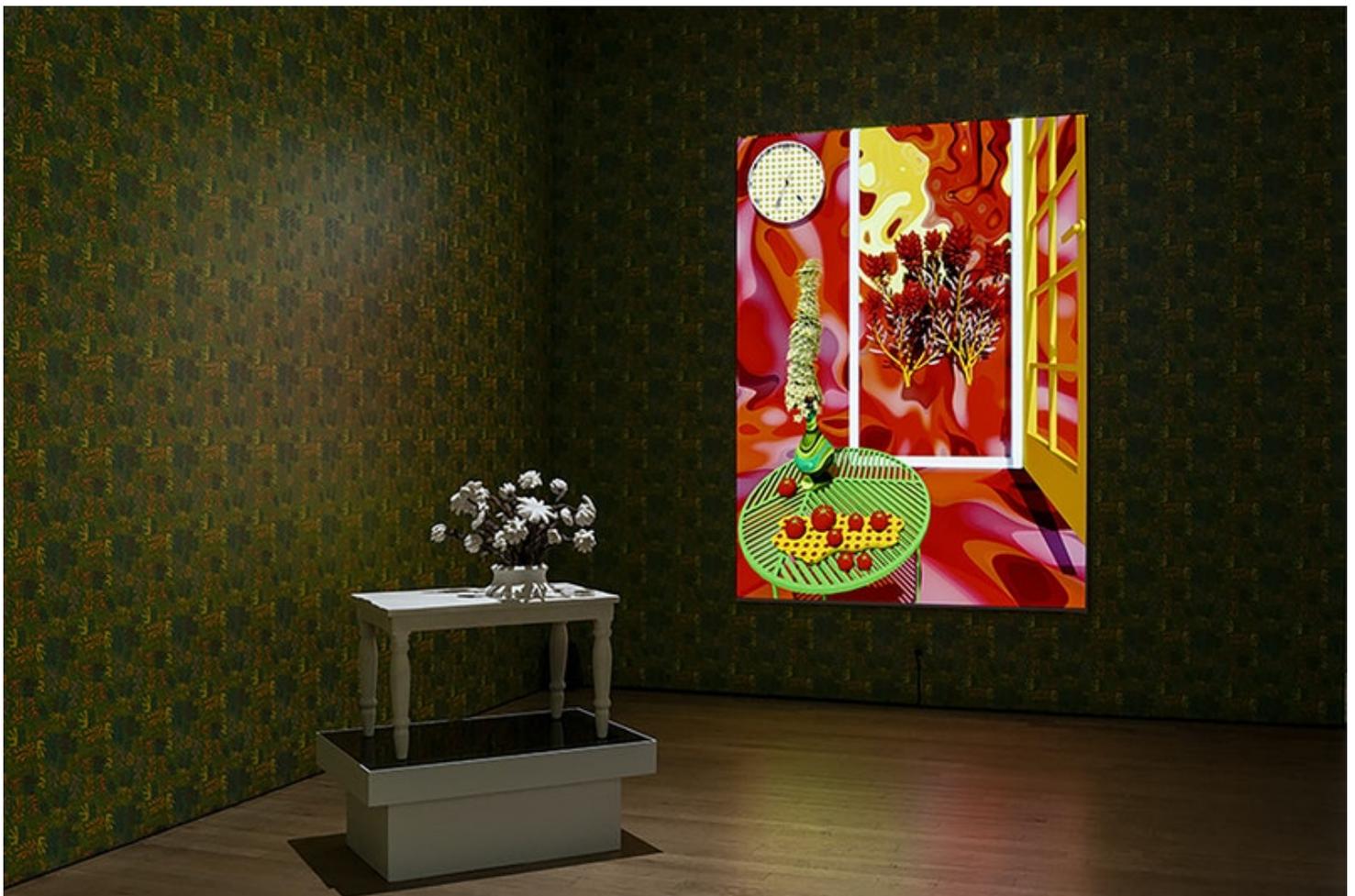


Claudia Hart, *The Orange Room*, 2019. Video animation (color, sound), media player, screen or projector, dimensions variable, landscape orientation, 5 minute loop. Courtesy bitforms gallery, New York. Photo: Emile Askey.
On View

bitforms gallery and Online
The Ruins
September 10 – November 1, 2020
New York City

The front window of bitforms gallery displays Claudia Hart's *The Orange Room* (2019), a bold crimson painting featuring energetic twists of lime green that slink down a wall, into and then across a table: the two dimensional wall becomes one with the three-dimensional table so that neither kind of space operates clearly. It's a painting. But actually it's a video animation that allows Hart to introduce rates of time to the dimensional illusions that Matisse created in his 1908 masterpiece, *The Dessert: Harmony in Red*. This modernist touchstone is the inspiration for Hart's work. The figure leaning over her table is no longer wearing white, but a flowing palette of cadmium red, yellow, orange—such distinct Matisse hues—and she is no longer tidying the table but holding a book on her lap. The book is open to a two-page spread of *Harmony in Red*. The viewer enters the gallery to see what Hart's figure, and Hart herself, saw in Matisse's famous painting.

The work that gives this exhibition its title, *The Ruins* (2020), is a three-channel video animation accompanied by a complex sound composition, all on a 10 minute loop. The viewer floats along a maze of works by various famous artists, with the channels designed so that they never overlap. The patterns on the floor and walls of Hart's labyrinth are custom augmented-reality (AR) wallpapers. On one wall is *Joyful Noise* (2020), produced in a painting simulator that accounts for gravity, allowing paint to run and otherwise act as it would in physical space. The opposite wall is covered with *Matissesque* (2020), where the AR reveals the heraldry and logos of failed empires and corporations. The labyrinth of *The Ruins* took two days to build. Hart then filled it over months with low polygon models (poor image renderings—thank you, Hito Steyer!!) of copyright protected works by Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Odilon Redon, and others, including herself. The soundtrack is produced by composer Edmund Campion, and remixes the artist's voice reading four different texts about failed utopian ideologies to create an eerie effect that only occasionally allows audible words to slip through.



Installation view: Claudia Hart: *The Ruins*, 2020. bitforms gallery, New York. Courtesy bitforms gallery, New York. Photo: Emile Askey.

This body of work stems partly from Hart's Virtual Installation course at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, in which she has students respond to the European Painting and Sculpture wing in the AIC museum. They can do this because these works are not under copyright. Matisse's, however, are. And what's more, he stands on the edge between a world that was and the one we've now clearly entered. His works use themselves to build themselves: windows within windows, a harbinger of the recursive systems of our day. This is not the only way that Hart makes Matisse speak to the present: her works are also responding to the rage and despair at where we are that so many of us feel today. Once upon a time, MTV was going to bring art to the masses and the internet was going to free us from the shackles of oppressive authority, social and class hierarchies, and even tedium. We all live with what happened instead.

25 years of audiovisual animation working with and against the commercial media and marketing worlds led Hart to retreat from the dictates of 16:9 aspect ratio that typically governs screen culture, as well as the imperialism of RGB for digital color. The Barco laser projectors installed at bitforms for *The Green Table* (2020) and *Big Red* (2019)—loosely riffing on Matisse's *The Window* (1916) and *Daisies* (1939), respectively—transform the image quality by providing brilliant brightness, deep saturated color, and increased contrast ratio for stunning, tactile depth. These works feel like paintings, and not simply because they are produced as unique objects. They are mesmerizing in a way that the intense tempo of so much digital art doesn't allow. Hart programmed different rates of time for the flows of color, the motion of the flowers or fruits. There are those subtle shifts that one gets in the stillness of a garden.



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Positioned between *The Green Table* and *Big Red* is *The Still Life with Flowers* by Henri Fantin-Latour (2019), a 3D printed sculpture of resin, pigmented silicone, walnut, basswood, maple, and pine placed atop a Plexiglass pedestal. Amidst all the fluid motion of the other works, the pale stillness of this work is uncanny. It made me think of death, but also made me hope that the printed flowers might blink and start talking to me about the nature of still lifes or copies (Latour is known for both), the passage of time and obsolescence. Still lifes are a kind of *memento mori* and Hart's works here somehow both recognize and bid farewell to an overwhelmingly influential period of art.

Playing with masterworks requires boldness. It is so easy to be derivative, hard to overcome the anxiety of influence to step with, through, and beyond. Hart, however, made me appreciate Matisse's greatness, not merely as a point of fact, but for the *luxe, calme et volupté* he urged on a world that remains outrageously banal in its evil and colorless in its authoritarian soundbites. In the gallery, immersed in Matisse and modernism, those figures now like Shelley's "Ozymandias," I saw not "the lone and level sands" but a lively jungle of art stretching far ahead, tended by those who dare to venture into the tangle. Hart travels in hyperreality, thinking through media archeologies and post-photographic practices, but is also a draughtsperson and painter. All of this merges forcefully in bitforms's exhibit, which recognizes the failures of so many Eurocentric utopias, and yet engages modernism in a way that releases any hold those artists, designers, political and cult leaders once had. They are a part of history, not the end of it. They are references, not dogmas. When Hart's eye turns, it gazes steadily, forthrightly through the past to create what must come.

Contributor

Charlotte Kent

Charlotte Kent PhD is Assistant Professor of Visual Culture at Montclair State University. Her current research investigates the absurd in contemporary art and speculative design, often in relationship to issues of digital culture. She writes for *Artists Magazine*, *CLOT*, *Litro*, *Musée*, and regularly for the *Brooklyn Rail*, among others. She serves on the Board of Governors of the National Arts Club.