

# Art in Review

## Michele Abeles

### 'English for Secretaries'

47 Canal

47 Canal Street, Lower East Side  
Through Sunday

Michele Abeles is one of several younger photographers — among them Liz Deschenes, Eileen Quinlan and Sara VanDerBeek — who are extending the innovations of the Pictures Generation into new territory. The photo-based works in her second show at 47 Canal are complex mixes of set-up photography, appropriation and rephotography that are mostly assembled on a computer.

Ms. Abeles's images are radiant, seductive and mysterious. They invite and thwart reading. She weaves images and patterns into collagelike, even quiltlike mashups that are nonlinear rebuses — rebuses speaking in tongues. They cross and recross the line between abstraction and representation, also between private and public, between the natural and the artificial, always reminding us that images deluge every aspect of life.

You can assume that everything you are looking at has a source, not only in the world but perhaps also in previous Abeles works. The mixture of Asian characters on the background of shaded pastels that recurs throughout these images appeared as fabric in the photo-

graphs in Ms. Abeles's first show at 47 Canal, often draped over a platform on which a nude model reclined. This script motif peeks into the corner of two parts of a triptych, each dominated by the same snapshot of a cat sitting on a Persian rug in a backyard, one slightly larger than the other. The third part of the triptych is more abstract, but as you look you realize that elements from it frame the other two parts.

Here and elsewhere you'll find motifs that seem to conjure other art, in particular the early nudes of David Salle and the brick patterns of Kelley Walker. Usually Ms. Abeles combines the pointed and obscure with enough visual pizzazz to keep you interested.

ROBERTA SMITH

# ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS - New York

## Michele Abeles

47 CANAL  
47 Canal Street, 2nd Floor  
April 18–May 19

Michele Abeles's ink-jet prints emerge through twin operations of building up and flattening out. In the nine compositions on view, Abeles permutes a stock vernacular of images—palm fronds, stippled skin, torn newspaper, a box of Abilify—that she photographs digitally and then recycles. Each is arranged in intercalated planes that, rather than recede into the frame, sit strangely atop its surface, creating tableaux whose depth mimes that of a computer screen. Her first show at 47 Canal turned on the allure of passing analog techniques for digital, with ostensibly edited effects arising through an intricate architecture of Perspex, gels, and green screens. This second round, while still beholden to in-studio sculptural setups, collapses the two modes. Photoshop's default, the rectangular "layer," furnishes the photographs' logic, and Abeles deploys many of the program's signature quirks, bounding planes with drop shadows and filling shapes with slow, synthetic fades. If software and-studio-based abstractions are impossible to distinguish, parsing the two, Abeles suggests, is a moot project.

A recumbent cat, rendered so sharply as to appear almost suspended above a patterned rug, anchors the triptych *Coaches*, 2013. The animal, its gaze trained at the camera, appears twice: first in the upmost photograph and again, slightly smaller, in the leftmost iteration. Planks of unvarnished wood rim the carpet, forming a sort of frame within the frame and hedging a spread of lush greenery. In a subtending layer, metal chains and gessoed tiles weave across a creamsicle-to-lime gradient. These elements recur in the bottommost print alongside an incurved cutout of a Monet water lily overlain with stencil-style type.

Literalizing Abeles's theme of repetition, *Transparencies* and *Transparencies II*, both 2013, are an identical pastel-smooth pastiche. Atop the glass pane of the first work, a mangled female nude, lifted from Francis Picabia's own "Transparencies," is outlined in red oil. The two titles prove provocative in light of both the opacity of the prints' facture and the long-held notion of the photograph as an unclouded window into the world. In the compressed, high-def spaces Abeles constructs, transparency only ever affords a view of another plane of pixels.



Michele Abeles, *Transparencies*, 2013, archival pigment print, oil on glass, 38 5/8 x 29".

— Courtney Fiske

## ‘Michele Abeles: English for Secretaries’ at 47 Canal

Two years after inaugurating 47 Canal with a barn burner of a solo show, New York-based photographer Michele Abeles is back, and not a moment too soon. Ms. Abeles is, to my mind, the best among a promising pack of young artists, like Travess Smalley, Lucas Blalock and Talia Chetrit, who use both analog and digital means to create still lifes and abstractions that feel bracingly new: deadpan and strange and attuned to the freewheeling networks in which images circulate today.

Ms. Abeles has made most of the nine photographs here by using a computer to collage images from a variety of sources into frenetic but tight and intelligent compositions, as if a series of computer windows have been collapsed onto each other. Images of ropes, chains and ferns share space with newspapers, verdant forests and a lounging cat. Many of the elements recur across multiple photographs, and some are recycled from her previous pieces. They’re bewitching.

These networks of images sit atop backgrounds that recall the tropics—gradient fields of light oranges, yellows, teals and pinks that flow into one another. Photoshop wizardry abounds. Thankfully, unlike certain of her fellow travelers, Ms. Abeles never indulges the fashion for fetishizing bad early computer-graphics design, a gesture that is already aging badly. Instead she’s occupying a space between good and bad taste, just beyond the bounds of where things start to get too tacky or too cutely clever. The scattering of computer images and shapes across those washes of color in *Transparencies II* (all works 2013) is unrepentantly pretty and positively tranquil while defying any sort of cohesive reading. As with an Impressionist bowl of fruit, the best response is to just keep marveling.

With Ms. Abeles, there is always a twist. (This is the artist who sent Paz de la Huerta to impersonate her at the Rob Pruitt Awards.) *Transparencies I* is the same photo as its sequel, but Ms. Abeles has painted a Picabian cut-apart nude woman in red atop the photograph’s glass, adding one more window—this one physical. And then there is *Young-Girl*, a haunting black-and-white portrait of the artist Marie Kalberg against a white background, as fearsome and still as one of the wolves or owls in the photos that Ms. Abeles was known for before she ventured into collage. It’s a straight photograph, with not a digital trick in sight. It underscores the potency of a medium that is currently enjoying a rich moment, and which Ms. Abeles is leading with brio and grace.