

KQED

"Clare Rojas' New Paintings Depict the Rich Inner Lives of Women"

By Champe Barton

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Installation view of 'Clare's Balls' at Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. (Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; Photo by Phillip Maisel)

A single painting greets visitors in the entryway of Clare Rojas' latest exhibition at Jessica Silverman.

In it, a man sits in the corner booth of a diner with his legs spread wide and his elbows splayed wider. One protruding arm crumples the flowers in a nearby vase. A woman stares past him down the length of the table looking dejected, maybe a little bored. Her shoulders are hunched and her hands are in her lap. A painting on the wall above depicts a bird, contorted awkwardly, as if pressed against the glass of the frame. It seems stuck. So does she.

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If something feels a little hackneyed about this piece, titled *The Stallion* (the “manspreader” is a well-known trope at this point), head on into the gallery. You’ll find that the painting is better read as a preamble than an opening jab.



Clare Rojas, 'The Stallion,' 2024; oil on linen. (Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; Photo by Phillip Maisel)

The rest of the show — 22 works in Rojas’ distinctive abstract figurative style, full of sharp lines and flat planes of color — plumbs the psyche of that woman bottled up at the diner. Rojas is interested in her alienation, her relationship to her body, how she must ache to breathe something fresher than the fumes wafting from her companion’s comically large coffee mug.

Rojas was born in Columbus, Ohio, but moved to San Francisco in the early aughts, where she became part of the Mission School, a group of artists working in and around the city’s Mission District. The movement engaged in a kind of renegade street art, employing non-traditional materials like spray paint, correction fluid and found objects to make folk-art inspired compositions.

Rojas spent much of this time painting playful, stylized animals amid folksy quilt patterns, often with a feminist bent. Around 2011 she abruptly overhauled her practice, swapping the fairytale figurativism of her early work for straight abstraction. Lately, the two styles have begun to merge.

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Several of the paintings in the present exhibition feature characters whose bodies have been partially replaced with geometric abstractions: black circles floating on alabaster backgrounds over disembodied legs, or piles of brightly colored shapes arranged to suggest supine women. Rendered with graphic precision and not a small amount of whimsy, they evoke a kind of *Alice in Wonderland* discombobulation.



Clare Rojas, 'Night Rocks,' 2024; oil on linen. (Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; Photo by Phillip Maisel)

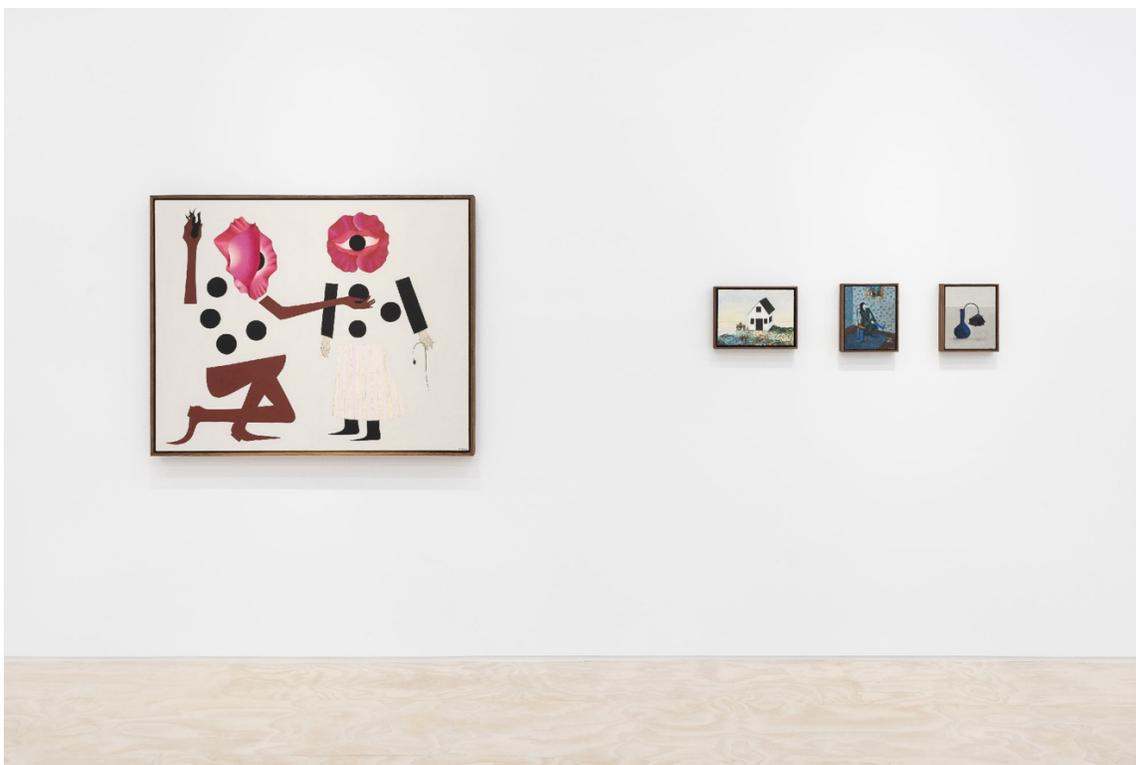
Other paintings depict women alone in sprawling picturesque landscapes. In *Night Rocks*, a woman wanders a cliffside plateau overlooking a swirling black-blue ocean. In *Ducks in a Row*, a lone figure sits along the bank of a pale blue lake, nestled between two majestic trees — one bare down to its capillary branches, the other just beginning to shed. The women are painted with their backs to us and at a distance, giving the compositions a protective quality, as if to say: *let them not be disturbed*.

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Somewhat perplexingly, Rojas has titled the exhibition *Clare's Balls*. This literally refers to a recurring motif in the show of solid-colored circles and spheres, which substitute for eyes, moons, heads, bodies and voids. But the name promises an irreverence better suited to the artist's earlier work — and her penchant for tongue-in-cheek male nudes — than to the actual paintings on display.

Rather than irreverence, Rojas' show evinces an almost tragic yearning. It is full of women anxious to locate themselves within that diner booth, seeking or savoring respite from *The Stallion's* suffocating encroachment.



Installation view of 'Clare's Balls' at Jessica Silverman. (Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; Photo by Phillip Maisel)

Their malaise produces fantasies, like the red-faced, seafoam-haired woman who roams an otherworldly wild in *Blue Boot Bonnie*. And it produces horrors, like the pair of disembodied arms raising eyeballs to a nonexistent head in *I Can't Believe My Eyes*. Birds, those symbols of flight, abound. The longing is palpable even in Rojas' technique, like how she layers a milky autumnal red over a patchwork of cornflower and lime green in the one lush tree from *Ducks in a Row*. The undertones peek out from between brushstrokes, giving the mixture a dazzling richness. You want to submerge yourself in its blaze. You should.

This is the real achievement of Rojas' show: not its balls, but its empathy. Her paintings reflect an insistence on considering the interior life of that woman in the diner — a richer and more interesting project than simply condemning the treatment she endures. The show reminds us that it is possible, when making political art, to make our discontent a means, not an end. In Rojas' case, it becomes a prism through which to refract herself, 20 times over.

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