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Janice Nowinski,
Nude on a Piano,
2021, oil on panel,
5 × 7".

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The world depicted by painter Janice Nowinski in her exhibition at Thomas Erben Gallery was an alluring one, and not merely because of its fleshy, often naked characters—rendered as solitary figures or arranged into clumpy groupings—that were gleaned from the artist's personal photographs, evoking works by Pierre Bonnard, Paul Cézanne, and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, to name a few. For all their erudition, the twenty-two small-scale oils on view disavowed formal refinement in favor of gestural awkwardness and a rambunctious sense of ambiguity. The gallery walls were

partially painted a cool, rosy white to complement the near whitelessness of Nowinski's palette. The images on display made riddles of light and depth; their fixations were contagious, intriguing, and complex. Take the titular instrument of *Nude on a Piano*, 2021, which looks like a leaden tumult of battleship gray with a few tiers of white dragged through it. A woman is sprawled across this muddy mass; on one side of her torso is an inexplicable little dash of mustard yellow with a gleam of bright pink, the hues receding while pulling the painting's black background into prominence.

Throughout Nowinski's works are instances of what can be construed as unifying ruptures: For example, the figures in *Two Women on a Couch*, 2021, are conjoined by a globby patch of variable pinks that brings the eye from one figure's knees to the inner thigh and belly of the other. Whether it is meant to evoke a blanket or pillow or swath of light doesn't matter: As an element of the composition it's indispensable. This pink interloper lends a sexy domestic goofiness to the scene, and without it the women would be afloat in a murky flatness. Although Nowinski's images are pulled from the history of painting and portrait photography, they are informed by a sensibility that seems to oscillate between knowingness and total abandon.

The cartoony facial features of Nowinski's subjects are coarsely outlined when they are there at all—as if an earnest vandal has been having a go at things. Sometimes this translates into pathos, as in *Nude with Green Pillow*, 2021, in which a woman's facial expression might be read as inscrutable torment (or not). What is particularly narrative and compelling in this piece, however, is the bulging green form that pushes into the figure's left side—a richly layered mass of emerald, moss, and chlorophyll that has been labored over so that it achieves a kind of antique luminescence.

The canvases' rough surfaces and staccato brushstrokes frequently confer grace, and the effect is astonishing. Two marvelous examples were *Standing*

Nude with Long Hair, 2021, and *Blue Nude*, 2018, a pair of moody boudoir tableaux that are spooky, forlorn, and somewhat furtive. *Nude in Front of Mirror*, 2021, was especially potent; in it, a wonky triangle of bioluminescent blue light in the upper-right quadrant hovers phantomlike over a scene of solitary intimacy. The room is rendered in deep cobalt, violet brown, and lurking grays. Yellow lines loosely delineate the frame of the mirror in which we see two breasts and a featureless lump of a face—an anonymous visage that repels desire. Nowinski undoes the carnal vanity trope of the lady at her toilette and depicts a haunting instead. As in all of the artist's works here, mystery is rife, the complexities are many, and the tricky delights of painting are manifold.

— [Charity Coleman](#)