

Review Farah Atassi paintings: Part Picasso and pure catnip for fans of midcentury design



Farah Atassi, "The Swimmer," 2017.

The paintings of French Syrian artist Farah Atassi at Ghebaly Gallery hark to Picasso and Cubism, reducing everyday objects — vases, telephones, guitars — to flat, elemental shapes that dissolve into riotous paroxysms of pattern.

The works also clearly draw from mid-20th century design, which is perhaps why they look new. The current vogue for the clean lines and clear colors of everything midcentury turns these paintings into hipster catnip.

That said, they are grittier than one might expect. Underneath the flat shapes and hard edges, one can easily discern ridges and whorls from previous iterations. The final paintings may look like cheery, breezy designs, but they feel hard-won. The underlying texture allows you to see Atassi thinking things through, trying things out. They convey a gravity and a personality that a flatter, cleaner image could not.



Farah Atassi, "Still Life with Clock 2," 2017.

A penchant for visual ambiguity also saves the works from being simply pleasing or pretty. The still lifes are especially compelling in this regard. They typically depict an arrangement of objects on a table or shelf, but this surface is only barely distinguishable from the surrounding walls. Both are covered in high-contrast, brightly colored patterns.

The objects also reinforce this visual confusion. For every recognizable vase of flowers, there is a shape that might be a wall hanging or a decorative screen or perhaps just another shape. It could be something abstracted beyond identification, or not.

The images vibrate, not only with color and shape, but with the irresolvable nature of their impossible spaces. This tension is nothing new in painting, but it's a pleasure to see it explored with such verve and assurance.

The background materials for the show mention Fernand Leger as another touchstone for Atassi, who is based in Paris. But I also see a little of the American modernist Stuart Davis, and jazz. Both are grounded in reality but are capable of taking us somewhere else entirely.

Ghebaly Gallery, 2245 E. Washington Blvd., L.A. Ends Saturday. (323) 282-5187, www.ghebaly.com



Farah Atassi, "Blue Guitar," 2017.