

MARTOS GALLERY

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What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

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Alex Chaves's "Baby Alex Baby," an oil on canvas in his New York solo debut at Martos Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Martos Gallery, New York

Alex Chaves, 'The Rose Period'

By ROBERTA SMITH

Like many young artists today, Alex Chaves seems to view painting and early Modernist figuration as full of potential, and he argues the case convincingly in his New York solo debut at Martos. His paintings, at once sophisticated, naïve and vaguely illustrational, combine a roving color sense and engaging paint handling with emotional poignancy. His New York solo debut is cheekily titled “The Rose Period” after one of the earliest (1904-6), most popular phases of Picasso’s career.

Like Picasso in those years, Mr. Chaves takes inspiration from Post-Impressionism, Fauvism and Symbolism and applies it to somewhat neurasthenic figures who may be friends. “Peter,” a standing nude in a landscape, reprises Cézanne’s “The Bather,” except that the arms are posed like those of the youth in Picasso’s Cézanne tribute, “Boy Leading a Horse.”

“The Rose Period,” a long mural-like rectangle, is populated by a Picassoid harlequin in pink polka dots, two Gauguinesque Tahitians and a wan couple reminiscent of absinthe drinkers. The requisite bit of pastoral water — a baby-blue river with baby-pink stones — contrasts with a bright-yellow foreground. In “Baby Alex Baby,” his self-portrait is flanked by baby Buddhas — one blue, and one pinkish-brown that rests on a beautifully suggested textile.

Jagged pieces of drywall fitted neatly into shiny metal frames on wheels occasion mobile two-sided paintings made a bit wilder by graffitilike scribbles of colored pencil.

Mr. Chaves’s surfaces are rough and patchy but intimately so, and his shapes are rarely a single color. He prefers to apply scores of closely related hues, one distinct stroke at a time, and the forms flatten, bulge or fragment accordingly. In his best paintings, this process offers the possibility of endless exploration and makes them feel fresh and promising.