

At the Galleries

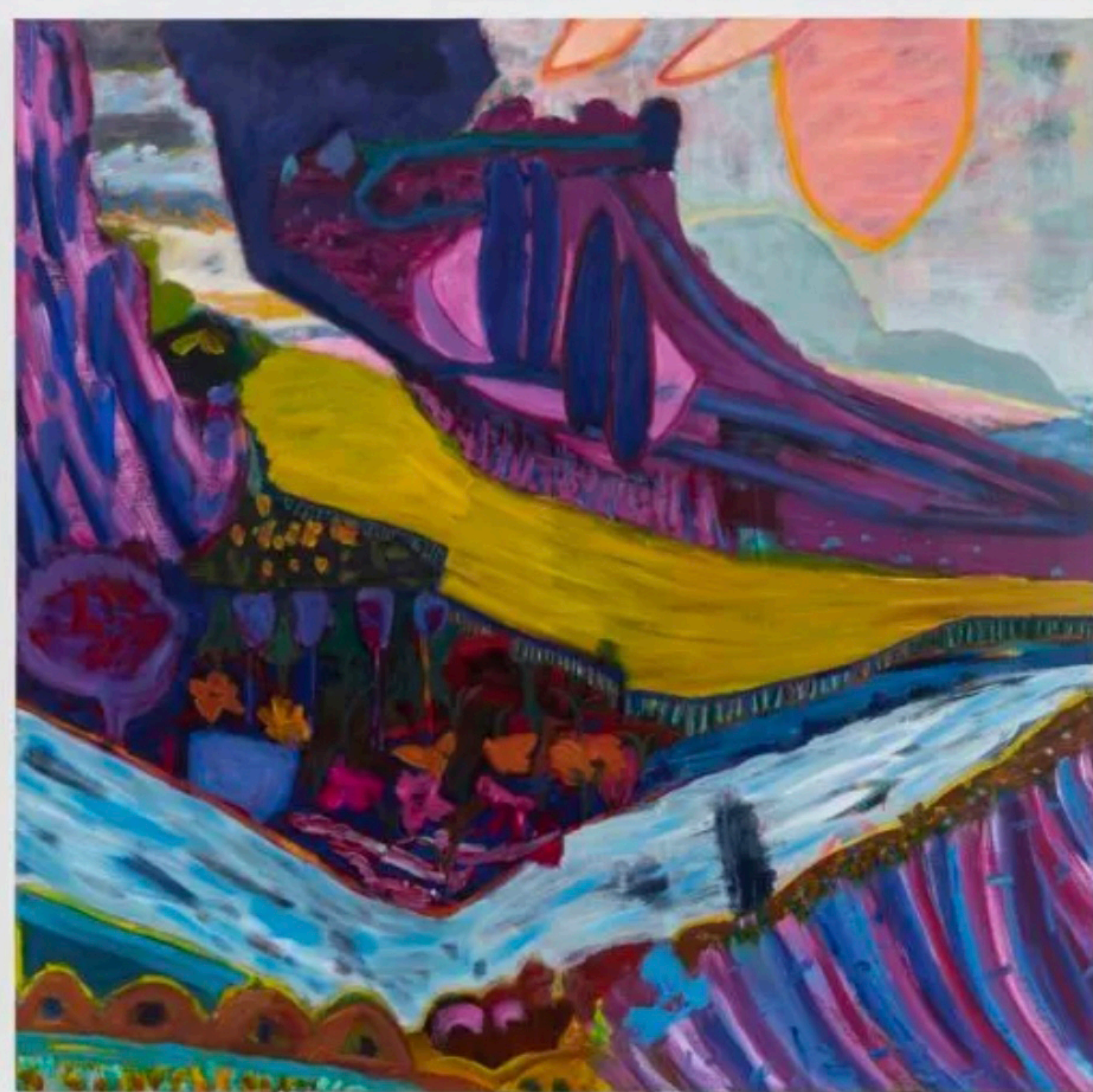
by Karen Wilkin

Attention to artificial intelligence and NFTs notwithstanding, the past season was dominated not by computer generated effects, but by *paintings*. Wide-ranging exhibitions bore vivid witness to the persistence and health of work made by hand by passionately committed individuals. Some of the most compelling shows were by noteworthy artists working today, including James Little (a star of the most recent Whitney Biennial), Lisa Corinne Davis, John Walker, and Julian Hatton, plus an unexpected, illuminating pairing of Rackstraw Downes and Stanley Lewis, but we also were offered work by less frequently exhibited painters from the recent past, such as the Italian-born Horacio Torres (1924–1976) and the American Bob Thompson (1937–1966), as well as, from an earlier generation, the Russian-born, Paris-based Serge Charchoune (1888–1975). And if anyone felt that the possibilities of twenty-first-century technology had been ignored, a large survey of Frank Stella’s studies and maquettes presented ample evidence of how contemporary materials and experimental techniques could be put into the service of high aesthetic ideals.



Julian Hatton, *Pollen Path*, 2022. Oil on canvas. 60 x 60 inches. Courtesy Elizabeth Harris Gallery. Photo: Adam Reich

Julian Hatton’s relationship to the visible world is very similar to Walker’s. A former *plein air* painter, he has, for some years, made vibrant invented images informed equally by careful study of the landscape and the possibilities of moving paint on a surface. His recent exhibition “Julian Hatton: Pollen Path,” at Elizabeth Harris Gallery, in Chelsea, included large, forthright “landscapes” whose brilliant, clashing hues and freewheeling planes were like updated versions of German Expressionism. Zones of spotting, dotting, and patterning, added as seasoning and to vary the scale, hinted that Pierre Bonnard lurked somewhere, as well. Hatton makes us omniscient, placing us on a high vantage point to survey silhouetted tree-shapes and zigzags that suggest the course of rivers. Rhythmic strokes seem to stand for growth. *Tempt* (2023), among the most abstract and hard to classify of the large paintings, first suggested a dramatic view of a river gorge and then became a nested stack of light blue and ocher planes, separated by energetically stroked areas of purple and hot pink; space snapped between fleeting illusionism and the fact of paint.



Julian Hatton, *Tempt*, 2023. Oil on canvas. 60 x 60 inches. Courtesy Elizabeth Harris Gallery. Photo: Adam Reich.

A group of small, robust works on panel bore witness to Hatton’s ability and hint at places that we feel we recognize simply by combining generous, bright shapes. Some of the “landscape-ness” results from our association of blues and greens with sky, water, and foliage, but Hatton could also dispense with such built-in triggers, playing instead with rowdy hues or—for example—broad verticals that made us think about tree trunks against the light, before they took their places in the abstract patchwork. Bold, playful, and intelligent, Hatton’s racy new paintings became equivalents for the vitality of the natural world through their jockeying shapes, lively patterns, saturated color, and more. Was that a refutation of the depressing effects of climate change, a reminder of what used to be, or a hopeful preview of a utopia to come?

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