



MAY 2025

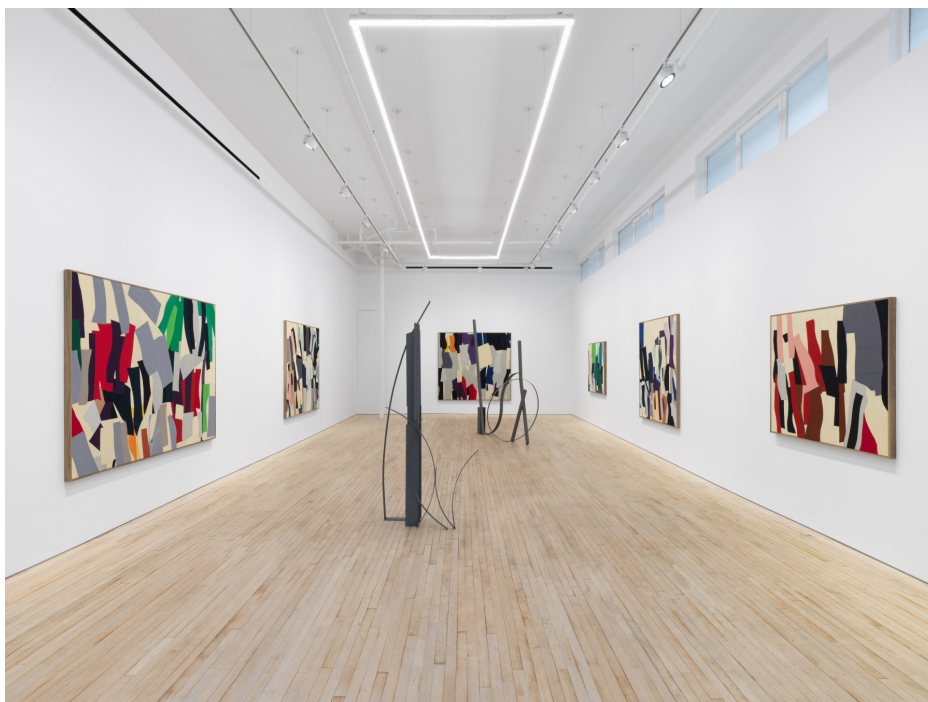
## Ethan Cook at Nino Mier Gallery

By Alex Bacon

In 1916 with their chance-derived collages, Jean Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp introduced one of the primary modes of what art historian Yve-Alain Bois calls “non-composition.” This is a term for the impulse that animated numerous modernist artists to decouple aesthetic meaning from authorial intention. Arp and Taeuber-Arp turned to the non-compositional mode of chance as a means to rupture familiar modes of composing an artwork. In such a model the artist becomes the initiator of an action that generates a work of art, rather than controlling every aspect of its meaning. Instead the Arps worked with outside forces to motivate their work’s final appearance. In this case using the vagaries of gravity by dropping cut and torn pieces of paper onto a sheet, pasting them down wherever they happened to fall.

Ethan Cook inherits this approach and its accompanying impulse. In the age of AI and related technological developments, displaced and dispersed authorship has become the norm rather than the exception, such that an artist’s use of chance takes on new meanings and potentials today. Cook has long employed chance both materially, in how his works incorporate the “errors” and idiosyncrasies that arise in the hand-made aspect of the weaving of the individual sections and passages of a given painting, and compositionally, by using it to determine aspects of the work, like the placement of forms.

Starting in 1916, and continuing through the 1970s, at least, non-composition most often gave rise to a more reduced, pared back aesthetic. This was due to the backdrop of tasteful composition that these generations of artists were responding to. What Frank Stella memorably referred to in 1964 as the “You do something in one corner and you balance it with something in the other corner” approach of relational painting. Today, when “minimalism” has seeped into popular consciousness through everything from the aesthetic of clothing stores, to mass produced designs at Ikea, chance tends to be a way to tap a lyrical undercurrent that is much more lacking in contemporary society than it was fifty years ago, say.



*Installation View. Ethan Cook, Free Hand. Nino Mier Gallery, New York. April 3 - May 10, 2025.*

In his exhibition at Nino Mier Gallery, New York, Cook has assembled a body of works, each containing a shimmering display of columnar forms, spliced and tessellated together. The artist embraces the optical athleticism of his compositions by titling them after ballet phrases, such as *Sauter*, *Battement*, and *Jete*. Accordingly, the forms prance across the field, with individual bars becoming anthropomorphized as limbs of sorts, elegantly extending to occupy pictorial space in various ways. By merging this lyrical optical play with the material presence of weaving, Cook brings together two traditionally opposing qualities and manages to unite them. In doing so underappreciated modernist textile works of the 1950s are suggested, a moment in which many major artists, from Picasso to Le Corbusier, engaged with the medium. However, weaving in Cook's works is always subsumed under the sign of painting, such that we read it as a means to produce form and a way to imbue color in a playful, yet mechanized way.

Related forms cut from steel stack and extend in the new sculptural work that Cook introduces in this exhibition. Columns bend and stretch, giving new life to the forms familiar from the modernist tradition of welded steel sculpture that extends from Pablo Picasso and Julio Gonzales's collaborations, through David Smith, on to Anthony Caro. What is compressed and dense in *Space Group*, where the forms hold together as if bound by magnetic attraction, sinuously extends in *Lariat Glisser*, where an s-curve joins two agglomerations of forms, appearing both dynamic, but also at rest, as if in a place of momentary respite. This interplay between action and stasis, so central to modernist ballet by the likes of George Balanchine, is to some degree controlled by the viewer as they circumambulate the sculpture, causing forms to collapse together and then elongate, depending on what position we hold in a given moment in relation to the sculpture.

Over the course of Cook's career, with this new body of work as the current apex, we see how his embrace of a traditional mode of deskilling—i.e., the semi-mechanized aspect of craft—has over time, as he becomes ever more skilled at his metier, been shown to in fact be a means of re-, or otherwise, skilling. It has been used in the service of producing the kinds of lyrical compositions we find in the works on view in *Free Hand*. The very title of the exhibition suggests the freedom that Cook's hand has gained over the years that he has now been producing work in this mode. Indeed, that such discovery has led him into this body of steel sculpture suggests how the freedom of the loom, can translate into a formal freedom even in a traditionally more static, even monumental, medium, such as steel sculpture.