

NINO MIER GALLERY

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Asher Liftin

Cat's Cradle

New York | Tribeca

January 9 – February 14, 2026

Nino Mier Gallery is pleased to present *Cat's Cradle*, Asher Liftin's third solo exhibition with the gallery, opening January 9th at our Tribeca location. *Cat's Cradle* showcases twenty new works, each presented as a suite of twenty framed works on paper. Every suite contains one original drawing accompanied by nineteen replica prints of the remaining drawings in the series.

Poet and art critic Barry Schwabsky wrote the following on occasion of the exhibition.

When Asher Liftin first sent me some jpegs from his *Cat's Cradle* project, my response was that I couldn't understand what I was looking at. I needed to see these things in person.

Little did I realize that I wasn't just articulating a common problem, one that's existed at least since the rise of color photography but which became really pervasive with the advent of the internet, email, and social media: Images of artworks give us information about them but not the experience of them that would allow for a proper understanding of that information. I was also unwittingly pinpointing the philosophical crux of *Cat's Cradle*, which is that an artwork may convey an image, but is not in itself only an image: On the one hand, it is also a thing, and on the other, it is a node in a system of meaning. Art is both more material and less material than an image. But images of the work tend to produce the illusion that the work is an image above all.

This is a new, art-specific variant of an ancient conundrum: the incongruence between appearance and reality. In art, this conundrum has often manifested itself through *trompe l'œil*, that is, the creation of an illusion of three-dimensionality. This is distinct from ordinary representation, which is never intended to create the possibility of a misrecognition: When I see a picture of, say, a lemon in a dish, I never mistake it for a real lemon in a real dish. By contrast, a successful *trompe l'œil* is one in which I really might imagine, at least momentarily, that the painted thing is a real one. The painted image of a crumpled piece of cloth might well be taken for the thing it depicts. It is an at least temporarily effective deception. *Trompe l'œil* painting is often dismissed as superficial trickery—closer to a sleight of hand than to the play of mind. But Yves Bonnefoy's great book *Rome, 1630*, convinced me that, at least in the Baroque era, *trompe l'œil* had theological import, impinging on weighty issues of faith and doubt.

Cat's Cradle is not exactly a work of *trompe l'œil*. Rather, it's a work that turns *trompe l'œil* inside out by making the artwork itself the occasion of deception and doubt and not just its instrument. Here I should briefly set out the work's unusual terms. *Cat's Cradle* has two guises. In its first phase, as it is exhibited in the gallery, it consists of a grid of twenty drawings each incorporating photographic imagery: Drawn with colored pencils are deliberately commonplace-looking still lifes, lemons being the most frequent element. In their very simplicity, the still lifes evoke the *longue durée* of Western art, let's say from Pompeii to Cézanne, but also the generic quality of student exercises. These still lifes have been semi-decomposed into grids of lines, of chromatic threads, as if transformed into a loosely woven piece of fabric; think of the pointillist dissolution of the painted image into a field of dots, but substitute vertical and horizontal lines for

the dots. And just as textile swatches might be, these swatches of pictorial fabric are shown as manipulable and destructible: The artist shows them as variously pulled, folded, torn, crumpled, and unwoven. In other words, the flat plane of the still life image becomes a three-dimensional object depicted in an ulterior pictorial dimension. The photographic element in this depiction—a second angle on reality—consists of the hands that are shown manipulating these sheets of pictorial fabric.

These twenty drawings are displayed facing a seemingly identical grid of twenty prints of the same drawings. That's in the project's first phase. In its second phase, the work consists of an edition of twenty sets of twenty sheets, each set containing just one of the original drawings and nineteen reproductions of

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its companions. Thus, the twenty editioned copies will appear identical, but each will have a different handmade image among its printed brethren.

Is it live, or is it Memorex? Can the unaided eye distinguish between the drawn and the printed? Today, the possibility of a fiction becoming an illusion presents not so much a theological issue, as it was in the Baroque era, as a psychological and sometimes political one. It's no longer about a faith that one might have or lack, but about the necessary skepticism that can overwhelm one's relation to reality—that can undermine one's connection to things as they are as much as it can provide a defense against reliance on things that are not. In this way, *Cat's Cradle* is an allegory of art in its relation to our everyday existence. On the one hand a very limited problem has been set: Liftin is playing with our inability to distinguish between a handmade drawing—and of course the hand is a key component in this work's imagery—and its technologically immaculate simulacrum. But this is only a local instance of a problem that in our culture is becoming more general, and has been doing so gradually for a long time. It was in 2016 that the Oxford Dictionaries named "post-truth" as the word of the year, but, paradoxical as it may seem, the idea of post-truth is only the obverse of the tagline of the 1990s TV series *The X-Files*: "The truth is out there." The truth is not abolished; it is simply unreachable, and in its absence, paranoia may seem to be the best policy.

But I don't think extreme incredulity is what Liftin is proposing. Yes, he's presenting the viewer with an intellectual and perceptual puzzle that in practice will be difficult to work out. But the pleasure comes, I think, not from solving the puzzle (and then checking the answer to confirm it) but from thinking through and following along with the structure of the puzzle's making.

And besides, the point is this: There's a puzzle behind the puzzle, and that one has no solution. The artist is not there to outsmart you. The pleasures of art admit of no correct answers. As for me, unlike the moment when I got Liftin's email, I now think I understand what I'm looking at. But do I really? In truth, I think of Liftin as a sort of pictorial magician, reminding me that the hand is quicker than the eye and then, with a wink, adding as if as an afterthought — though it's not—that the eye is also quicker than the hand. The artist carefully unmashes the warp and the weft of the image, but this undoing makes possible a different, more complicated and more strenuously engaging kind of image, strangely delicate and combining the cryptic with the self-evident, the idiosyncratic with the anonymous, the visible and the imperceptible.

Barry Schwabsky
New York, 2025