

# NEWCITY

*Full-Throated Nihilism: A Review of Paul Nudd at Western Exhibitions*

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Paul Nudd, "Stuffed Bottom Feeders," 2019.  
Acrylic and paper collage on canvas, 84 x 118 inches/Photo by James Prinz, courtesy of Western Exhibitions.

Enveloping all four walls of the gallery, Paul Nudd's recent works feel more like tapestries than paintings. The solid areas of thin color may be more appropriate for comic books than Persian carpets, and there is nothing rectangular about the flat patterns other than the outer edges. But there is an overall decorative effect of gentle stimulation and contentment. Life bubbles up to the surface. There is no sense of hierarchy or formalized order, but of course these designs did not just happen on their own like weeds overgrowing a garden. The artist has taken care to keep his designs unified, luminous, various and engaging.

Born in England a decade after the transformative Hairy Who exhibitions of the late 1960s, Nudd's bug-like human figuration is clearly in the tradition established by Jim Nutt and Karl Wirsum. But rather than raucous, schoolboy provocation, this work is more like full-throated nihilism, a predominant attitude in investment-grade American art for more than half a century.

The title of the exhibition, "Plastic Blastula," indicates that the figures are not only prenatal, they are pre-embryonic — even if one might identify arms, legs and, occasionally, sex organs. Human life is presented as a turbulent soup of gelatinous protoplasm comprised of mucky, hairy monsters. The figures have no structure, no gravity, no tension — they float and proliferate like bacteria. This is the amoral world of non-human life — with no concern for past or future. There is no divine plan, no social ideals, no concern for anything, really, beyond self gratification. This is human civilization as an invasive slime mold — infecting the planet, polluting its resources, eventually destroying itself and everything it has smothered with asphalt.

The rambunctious visuality is too playful to be disgusting, too melodic to be annoying and too cheerful to be depressing.

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