

Artist of the week 195: Alexis M Teplin

Comedy and unchastity are key in this American artist's vivid patchwork paintings and sculptures, which call for social change even as they flag up failures of cultural revolutions past



Sensual dazzle ... Alexis M Teplin's if. courtesy of Hotel

The Guardian, [Skye Sherwin](#)

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Flurries of luminous colour billow across the canvas in Alexis M Teplin's paintings. Their hectic patchworks of tomato reds, lush blues, peppermints, peaches and pinks recall American abstract expressionist [Joan Mitchell](#)'s most vivid, sun-drenched creations. The sensual dazzle has an earlier precedent, though: the theatre of rococo painting, with its festoons of clouds, flesh and flowers. Yet Teplin's approach is very 21st-century. Her paintings are sometimes shown as strips of unstretched canvas, with their tatty edges curling, while her sculptures are roughshod assemblages of plaster, paint smears and household finds.

Painting's sensual side fascinates the American, London-based artist. That's not just the instant hit of colour and brushwork, but what lies behind it: what happened with the shift from grand history painting, servicing the interests of the state, to a medium making its appeal to the less official (if no less revealing)

desires of its day. The rococo, particularly [Fragonard's](#) erotic confections, and Mitchell, are two key touchstones in the dense array of historical references Teplin brings into play.

Those in the mix for Progress, PLEAS., her current exhibition, include two celebrated satirical works. The first is [Fragonard's The Progress of Love](#). This cycle of paintings was commissioned shortly before the French revolution by Louis XV for his mistress Madame du Barry, who returned them, none too happy that the frolicking young things bore a cheeky resemblance to herself and the king. The second hails from another moment when the air was thick with the promise of social change: Luis Buñuel's 1972 Oscar-winning film about the promiscuous middle-classes who can never finish a dinner party, [The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie](#). It's a telling comparison: Buñuel's self-made financiers and industrialists might have replaced the aristocrats, but the old hierarchies, decadence and social stasis remains.

Two sculptures encircle Teplin's high-colour abstractions here: a yawning conch of drippy white plaster that could be a body or a mouth, bearing a picture of the Spanish film-maker rehearsing; and a dinner table, delicately arranged with silver spoons and chalky peaches, left to gather dust like Fragonard's fruit. Meanwhile, camouflaged in the lovely paintings are strips of canvas spelling out the show's punning title letter by letter – a misspelt please of desire and pleas of forgiveness. Things hover between pleasure and decay, an upbeat revolutionary vibe and failure. Progress please? The retort from the final two paintings in Teplin's cycle is cheerily sassy: AS if.

Why we like her: For her witty, gawky 2010 assemblage, Stick: a metal stand, wearing a flimsy cloak of white felt shreds, with a book about dancer [Martha Graham](#) for a head. Splashes of paint coat the dust cover, blocking out letters, so instead of the subject's name, it simply reads "ART AHA".

Making pictures: Teplin is a huge film buff, a passion nurtured by eight years spent studying in LA, soaking up everything from Bresson and Fassbinder to Douglas Sirk.

Where can I see her? [Hotel gallery](#), London E2, to 1 July.