

**Michele Araujo Playing Around** | Talking Pictures | February 15, 2023



*Untitled*, 2019  
Collage on vellum  
72x 39.50"  
(Photography by Alan Koppel)

You might as well forget genre when you encounter Araujo's work. There is an insistence on playfulness, freedom and improvisation. I guess you'll know what I mean when I say that you have to be dead serious to insist on that in your work—or in your life.

The Vulnerable Paintings are a series of acrylic paintings on vellum. There is an uncanny light and intense color washes. I am sorry to say that my photographs don't capture it at all, so go see them in person. In Araujo's paintings on panels, there is a tortured scraped sensuality that I deeply respond to. Vellum wouldn't stand up to that kind of abuse so something else happens—a kind of easy, or should I say uneasy, lightheartedness.

The basic intellectual and emotional impetus for Araujo's work comes from two sources: The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Jean-Martin Charcot's asylum for "hysterical" women.

The Yellow Wallpaper is a novel/memoir about a woman who begins to see visions in the wallpaper of her virtual prison. Yes, women and other people might become "hysterical" when they are forced to live in impossibly oppressive conditions.

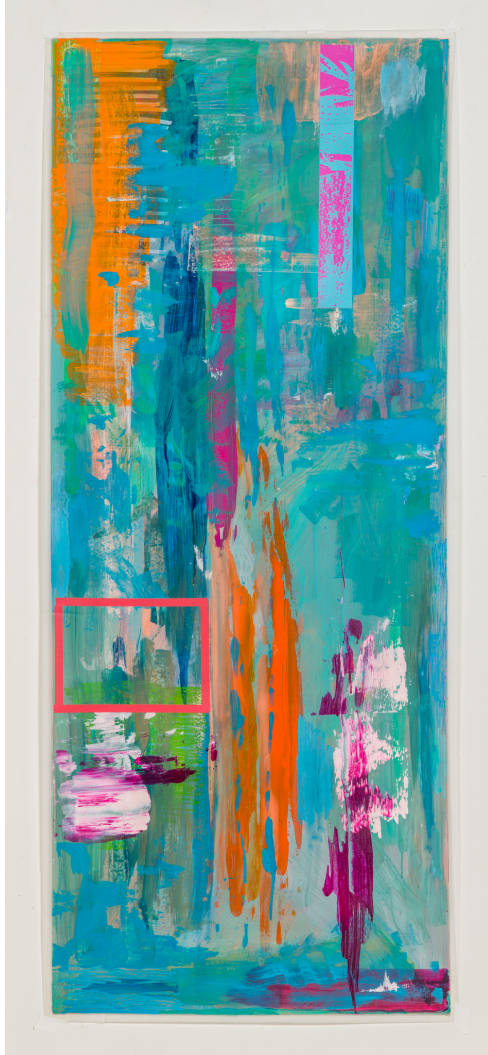
Araujo's genius is to focus on the visual aspect: the visions created by wallpaper. In the olden days wallpaper was very common and for all us kids who took sleepless naps or who were sent to bed early at the aunt's house, my god, you were halfway to being a painter already!—because wallpaper is strange and different in the daylight, the moonlight or the nightlight; the grids form other shapes, your eyes go back and forth trying to figure out the repetitions, who are these shepherdesses, why don't these flowers quite meet?

There are two dominant oscillating dimensions in these paintings—an active shallow surface established by scraps of wallpaper, other pictures or colored strips and a spatially deeper layer of swirling paint. The interaction between the two creates the picture. Sometimes as in Untitled (above) the colors and shapes of the paint mirror the paper. The red blotches seem to be smaller flowers further away and the green strokes at the top mimic the bits of green leaves. The green is surrounded by a swath of yellow paint and all together they make an enchanting garden in the sunlight. I think there is a blue flowered wallpaper butterfly or two, or more, in the upper left. Another reading might see the red spots as blood being washed away by rain like the red poppies that symbolize fallen soldiers—also hope.



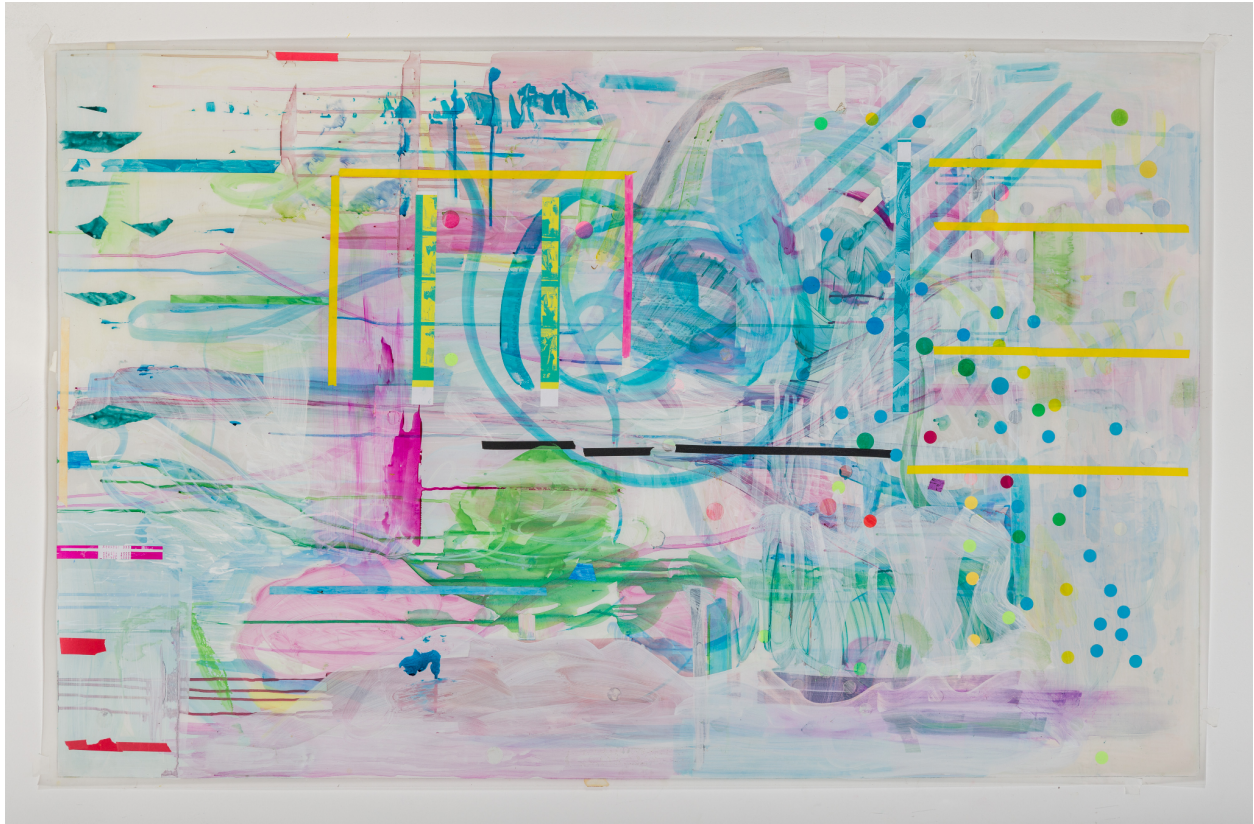
*Untitled*, 2019  
Collage on vellum  
73 x 46"

In this *Untitled*, the striped wallpaper functions in a completely different way from the first one I described—it establishes—almost— a frame through which you look into a misty distance. What seems so crazily playful about it is that as you look, the gestalt changes and the negative and positive shapes begin to flip. I think she has achieved this by the strong red at the bottom and the darker pinks on the right side that begin to compete for the foreground and become another frame pushing the strips of wallpaper back and establishing a deeper distance.



*Untitled, 2018*  
Collage and acrylic on mylar  
65.50 x 29"

Here a square of the painting has been isolated by bright orange strips creating a painting within the painting where another oscillation between deep and shallow space is contained. In the rest of the painting the bright orange paint and the cream and alizarin vie for the foreground. This idea of enclosing or pointing out a section of the picture doesn't happen anywhere else (as most artists would do) and maybe this is what gives the show such a playful feeling—something new is going to happen in each painting.



*Untitled*, 2010  
Collage on vellum  
44 x 69"

*Untitled* (2010) is shallower than the others. It's a chart—of annual rainfall maybe, or a musical score?

I don't think that Araujo actually plans in that way though. I'm speculating here but I think she is simply painting "in the moment" starting with one note and just riffing on that until the song is finished.

The question of whether Araujo is an abstract or figurative painter is an enigma. The whole abstract/ figurative argument doesn't matter to me so much anymore—if it ever really did. There are so many abstract qualities and ideas in figurative painting and vice versa in abstract painting. It got crazy with the idea that there is a narrative predicting the demise of painting itself. Her painting has always evoked specific memories, both physical and emotional and referenced art history: abstract expressionism, Hans Hoffman, Chinese landscape (I think), multiple playful ways to organize pictorial space—which I thought were contained in a basically abstract approach.

However, last year she published a memoir, *To Begin*, that pairs anecdotal stories with particular paintings. It might be the power of suggestion but it seems to me that the paintings then rearranged and activated themselves to embody these stories. In Featured Posts I've put up a couple of them, see below.

I try not to use the same word repeatedly in my reviews so I looked up synonyms for "play." There aren't any—nothing that captures the thrill of creating in the moment, not knowing what will happen next and inviting others to join you.

The best thing I found was a study that seemed to show that bumble bees like to play.\* But of course scientists don't yet know why.

—CNQ