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View of “Elizabeth Enders,” 2019–20. From left: *Battle of Lepanto 1571, 2019*; *Untitled—Fields, 2019*.

Elizabeth Enders

BETTY CUNINGHAM GALLERY

The last battle fought almost entirely between rowing vessels occurred nearly five hundred years ago. The mechanics, not to mention horrors, of such a confrontation are nigh unimaginable today. History paintings depicting the Battle of Lepanto tend to portray its maritime setting, in the Gulf of Patras off western Greece, as stuffed full of masts, prows, flags, cannons, and oars. Little order emerges from these chaotic scenes. In “Elsewhere,” Elizabeth Enders’s exhibition at Betty Cunningham Gallery—a fantastic, transtemporal, and world-spanning journey that unfolds across twenty-one works on paper and ten

paintings—the eighty-one-year-old painter, with a deft hand and unfussy form, approached the aforementioned fray like a cartographer or tactician lost in reverie. Across one oil and several watercolors based on this clash, we got an aerial view: Boats were rendered as black dashes and marshaled into formation on the surface of a neon-teal bay. Scant red strokes in the center of the action indicated the bloodshed between Europe’s Catholic forces and the Ottoman Empire’s navy, yet the schematized ships gave no indication of their naval affiliation. Enders focuses instead on landscape and location, using her seemingly fast-moving brush to delineate the contours of the coastline. Situated geographically between East and West, the Battle of Lepanto represented a turning point in Christian-Muslim relations: Pope Pius V’s Holy League decimated the Turks, further entrenching the church’s power. Enders wasn’t there to watch the fighting, of course, yet her rendition of the vessels’ oceanic choreography makes it seem as though she could have been.

This seafaring conflict, for all of its intrigue, is only one of Enders’s many subjects. The exotic locations and scenarios portrayed in “Elsewhere” evinced the artist’s continued commitment to the (fantasy) life of the mind, jumping as she does from sweet pastorals to historical turmoil.

Two sets of gorgeous watercolor landscapes, *Journey III–VIII* and *Green Tree—Pink Sky I–IV*, all 2019, established the exhibition’s palette of blues, greens, yellows, and an eerie light pink.

The five-by-five-foot oil *Along the Nile*, 2019, which centers on a pair of animated palm trees tinged with peach and set upon a field of chartreuse, is less about the famous river than it is about the riveting interaction of its dominant hues. The pieces in the exhibition with dates that spanned several years, *Field—China*, 1994–2019, and *Untitled*, 1999–2019, were abstractions in blue and red that stood apart from the other oils on display: They were moodier, quite labored, and far more inexplicable. Enders’s light touch, combined with the way she utilizes the dryness of oil paint, for instance—or the more liquescent aspects of watercolor—anchors her best works firmly in the present, even as her subjects recede into the past or disappear over the horizon.

The landscapes *Calligraphy—Mountain* and *Untitled—Fields*, both 2019, approach Matisse through an admixture of Diebenkorn and Guston. This is not to reduce Enders to a comparison with her male forebears, but rather to say that she is a damn good painter. Though Enders has been working for some fifty years, her footprint in the art world is extremely small. There is little information available about her life, her influences, or her process, and she has not been reviewed previously in this magazine. New York’s Museum of Modern Art should consider buying an Enders and hanging it in its newly reinstalled Matisse room next to Alma Thomas’s *Fiery Sunset*, 1973. She belongs there.

— Canada Choate