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What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries Right Now

Want to see new art in New York this weekend? Start in the Upper East Side with Frank Diaz Escalet's rich flat paintings of musicians.

Frank Diaz Escalet



Frank Diaz Escalet's "Prez 'n' Blue" silhouettes the saxophonist Lester Young and the trumpeter Blue Mitchell.

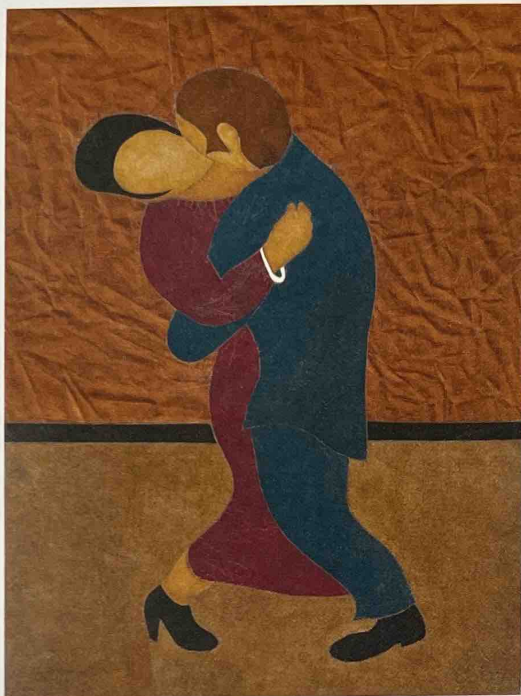
Two gallery shows celebrate the achievement of the Puerto Rico-born artist, Frank Diaz Escalet (1930-2012), who initially made paintings from stained leather before translating its rich flat colors into acrylic paint. Escalet's life had its share of sadness, but the condensed version centers on a man who, from 1958 to 1971, lived in a loft on the Bowery, frequented New York's jazz scene and enjoyed considerable success providing custom-made leather garments for celebrity clients, who included Aretha Franklin and the Rolling Stones. In 1971, he moved to Maine, where demand for his designs disappeared, and by the mid-1980s, he had turned full time to his leather paintings.

The two shows reflect the breadth of Escalet's subjects and sympathies, from mythic musicians to moments in ordinary, sometimes oppressed, lives. "Sing Me the Blues" at Meredith Ward reflects an ecumenical love of music with works titled "Taxi Dancers, 1940s," "Nite at the Opera," "Tango No. 12" and "Can-Can." "Prez 'n' Blue" silhouettes the saxophonist Lester Young and the trumpeter Blue Mitchell in performance against big geometric planes of bright magenta and yellow ... These shows are both great. — ROBERTA SMITH

Play It By Ear

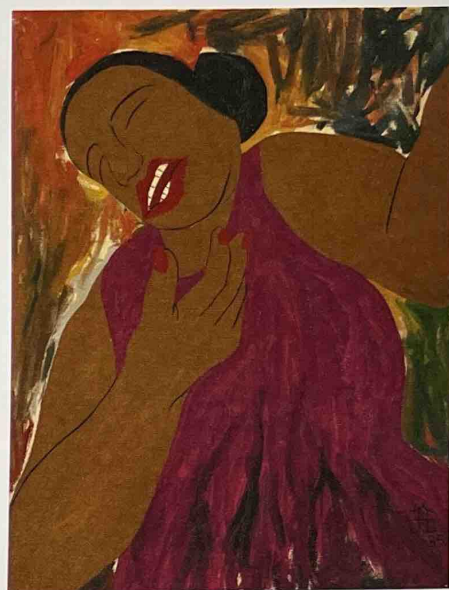
THROUGH JUNE 24, Meredith Ward Fine Art of New York will present “Frank Diaz Escalet: Sing Me the Blues,” an exhibition of the Puerto Rico-born artist’s paintings and inlaid cut-leather work. Escalet (1930–2012) was a self-taught artist whose family immigrated to the U.S. when he was four. Growing up in Greenwich Village and Spanish Harlem, he had to drop out of school after the eighth grade to help his family, though he always looked for ways to improve his art. “The more of a challenge something is,” he said, “the more fanatical I become. There’s a tremendous drive within myself that I will not stop. I will not let it beat me.”

After serving in the military, Escalet mastered metalworking and opened a leather shop in Greenwich Village called The House of Escalet that served celebrity clients such as the Rolling Stones and Aretha Franklin. He famously made a leather cello case for Pablo Casals. Later, he moved to Maine and, after finding it difficult to make a living, opened a studio and gallery and started to make artwork with inlaid leather in the 1970s. His work portrays the people he saw around him and the people he had grown up with, including hard-working laborers and people of color.



“I always portray life, the story-telling of people,” he said. “Today my work tells of Latin Americans, their struggles, hopes, dreams, and sorrows.”

His work also reflects his interest in music and the time he spent in jazz clubs in New York City, and the current show features several of these works. For example, his acrylic on masonite painting *Bessie! Sing me the Blues* (1985) features renowned Jazz Age singer Bessie Smith in



the middle of a song, her body, clad in a purple dress, moving to the music. Many of Escalet’s works capture the feeling of music and dance, including *Baile de los Jivaros* (1992, acrylic on masonite), which portrays people in bright clothing dancing to the music of an accordion. *Taxi Dancers 1940’s* (1985, acrylic on masonite) shows women in bright dresses taking a break from dancing. Escalet conveys them with a full sense of humanity and individuality. Also included in the show are works composed of inlaid leather, such as *Tango No. 12* (1977; cut leather on masonite). Though the dancers’ facial features are not shown in this image, the way they bend and embrace tells the viewer a great deal about them and their relationship to each other and to the music.

