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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