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Galleries

GILLES AILLAUD

Through May 11. Ortuzar Projects, 9 White Street, Manhattan; 212-257-0033, ortuzarprojects.com.

For decades, American art students have learned that the years around 1968 saw the triumph of conceptual art, process-based sculpture, environmental interventions and body-oriented performances — and only now, at half a century's distance, are we admitting that figurative painting had its place too in the late-1960s art world, especially in Western Europe. Gilles Aillaud (1928-2005) was a central actor of Narrative Figuration during Paris's years of student revolt, as well as a set designer at Europe's top avant-garde theaters. But "Paintings 1964-1976," with eight coolly composed portraits of animals in zoos, is the first showcase of his works in New York since a show at Gladstone Gallery in 1982.

Aillaud and two other young painters stormed to scandalous prominence in 1965 with the collective series "Live and Let Die, or the Tragic Death of Marcel Duchamp," which pictured the young French artists assassinating the father figure of the avant-garde. (They were also, by symbolically murdering a Frenchman who'd become an American citizen, spitting on contemporary Parisian envy of the New York School.) By 1967 Aillaud had turned to zoos, and before and after the student uprising he painted tortoises, rhinos, porcu-



FABRICE GOUSSET, VIA ORTUZAR PROJECTS, NEW YORK

pires and pythons under heat lamps or beside industrial pipes. In a bare blue cage we see two soporific lions, their eyes vacant, their fur painted with aloof strokes of white. Two hippopotamuses, their thick skin evenly rendered in bronze and burnt umber, float in an aquarium like corpses. The animals never do anything in these zoo paintings. They don't even meet our gaze; they just laze about on concrete and cinder blocks. It is a stifled view, conversant with the 19th-

century tradition of animalier painting, but stripped of any allegorical comfort.

Back in left-wing Paris 50 years ago, Aillaud's silent, unconsoling art appeared as the antithesis of gestural American abstraction, offering the most alienated view of an industrial capitalist society. They may be more moving today, in an era of climate emergency, when no distinction holds between the natural and the man-made.

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