

## CRITIC'S PICK

# A Masterpiece of Fiction Inspires the Urge to Submerge in a Gallery Crawl

In New York's art show of the summer, paint and prose meet in "The Swimmer," a psychoanalysis of John Cheever's suburban nightmare of 1964.



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**By Walker Mimms**

July 4, 2024

“Oh, how bonny and lush were the banks of the Lucinda River!”

Euphoria opens “The Swimmer,” the John Cheever story that greeted New Yorker readers 60 years ago this month. On a hot summer day much like this one, the upper-middle-class, lower-middle-aged Neddy Merrill decides in a burst of hale spirits — “bonny!” — to swim across his county (a thinly veiled

Westchester) by way of a necklace of 14 backyard pools, a makeshift “Lucinda River” he names for his beloved wife. A comedy of suburban class and taboo ensues, propelled by the socialites, nudists and plebeians who dot this improbable journey — and by Neddy’s struggle to overcome them.

A master class in pacing and character, “The Swimmer” is astonishingly brief for its punch, a test of values, and the story is often read more than once. A 1968 film adaptation trampled Cheever’s careful psychological ambiguities even as Burt Lancaster — at the peak of his powers — brought Neddy to life as a starry-eyed idealist.

So it was with some skepticism that I entered Flag Art Foundation’s group show based on “The Swimmer.” As with “Rear View,” a saucy group show of backsides last year at the short-lived LGDR gallery, and “Joan Didion: What She Means,” from the Hammer Museum, themed art shows are guilty pleasures.

Expression, not subject, is what matters in art. Right?



An installation view of "The Swimmer" at the Flag Art Foundation in Manhattan, a model for how to handle literature in the gallery. the critic says. Foreground: Jim Hodges, "If There had been a pool it would have

reflected us,” 1998, wool blanket. Photo by Steven Probert



Ed Ruscha, "POOL #2," from the Pools Series, 1968/1997. via Ed Ruscha and Gagosian



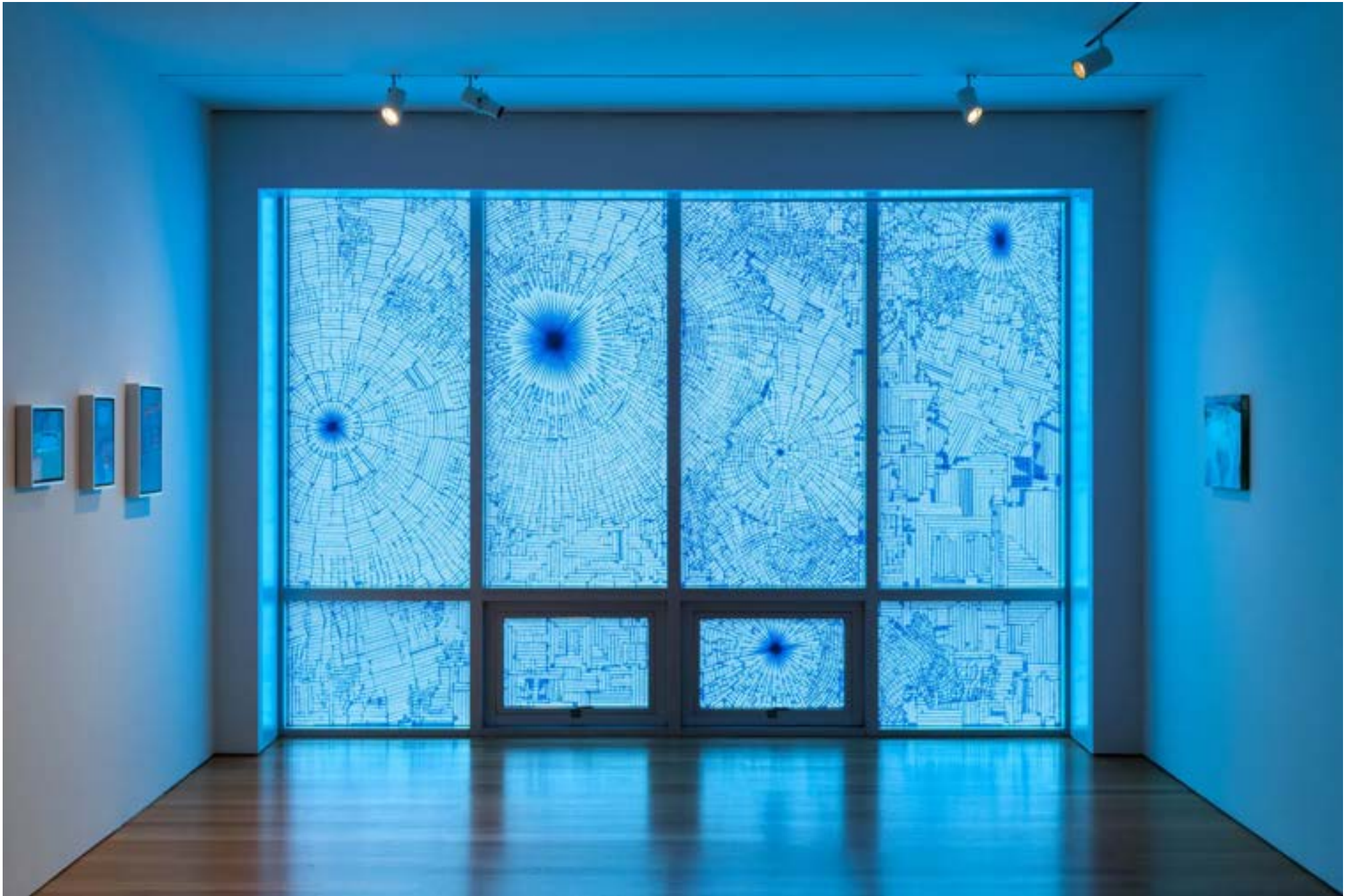
Ed Ruscha, "POOL #9," from the Pools Series, 1968/1997, featured in Flag Art Foundation's show "The Swimmer." via Ed Ruscha and Gagosian

But life is different, and in July you want a cold, delicious plunge. Tactile craving drew me into these 72 studies in water, some of them serial artworks, bringing the show to about 100 objects. Though Flag's director and curator, Jonathan Rider, commissioned new work from only six of his 29 participating artists (and one duo), this scattershot, at times aggressively conceptual assortment provides a rich anatomy of the swim, loosely united by Cheever's achievement. It's a model for how to handle literature in an art gallery.

Arranged in a regimental grid, the Ektacolor prints for Ed Ruscha's 1968 book, "Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass," find remarkably similar shades of glistening turquoise in nine locales he photographed in Las Vegas and Los Angeles. Upstairs in four works on newsprint, Paul Thek — the sardonic and macabre sculptor of the 1960s — applies hasty horizons of cerulean paint. Across one from 1969 a pink body dives, his hands just obscured into the surface, and his long muscles taffy-stretched like some deity of our urge to submerge.

Neddy's totalizing zeal — "He might have been compared to a summer's day," reads one line from "The Swimmer" — also fills Katherine Bradford's 11 small, dreamlike canvases commissioned for the show. In "Coming Home After Swim" (2024), the trunks of her recurring male figure disappear into a sapphire sky, while his limbs, dry-brushed in terra-cotta acrylic, appear to want to dissipate.

Thek's paintings are heroic, but get up close and all the noise underlying civilization wafts in: the ads for cabdrivers, typists and go-go girls from the 1969 Village Voice that he has painted on top of. Ruscha, too, has cropped a tiny corner or side of each pool so that their concrete wraparounds — and the synthetic junk reflected in them — become the subliminal subject.



Tony Feher, "Untitled," 2015/2024, a reinstallation of the minimalist artist's work with nonprecious materials: blue painter's tape on glass windows. Here, those materials create a vibrant space, "soaking you

— and the nearby artworks — in an invigorating glow of cobalt.” Photo by Steven Probert



Katherine Bradford, “Coming Home After Swim,” 2024. via Katherine Bradford and Canada, New York



Katherine Bradford, “Dive Mid Air,” 2022. via Katherine Bradford and Canada, New York

Junk turns fun in “Pharmacy,” by the emerging artist Leonard Baby — a fully stocked period minibar complete with clip-on Chanel earrings and glass prescription bottles of Valium. The assemblage channels the culture of hedge funds and highballs that Cheever, himself catastrophically addicted to alcohol, lampooned so succinctly.

The strivings of Thek, Bradford and others — artworks that deal with escape — get quite literally swallowed up by the show’s main draw: a work by Tony Feher. A ready-made minimalist who worked in trash, Feher died in 2016 and reinstallations of his work have been rare since. Flag’s floor-to-ceiling window has been coated in the intricate tessellations of blue painter’s tape (10 rolls’ worth) that he designed in 2015. They fragment and ripple out to the margins, soaking you — and the nearby artworks — in an invigorating glow of cobalt. You feel like a spider on a quivering surface.

Or a broken windshield. The thrall of “The Swimmer” is its subtle descent into mania. Mounting social cues from neighbors suggest something has gone terribly wrong in our hero’s recent past, but what? Where, come to think of it, *is* his wife? A wobbly timeline — autumn leaves, sudden cold — deepen the sense of Neddy losing his grasp — and force us to seek breadcrumbs of clarity.





An installation view of “The Pharmacy,” 2024, left, by Leonard Baby, a minibar with glass prescription bottles of Valium that channels the culture of hedge funds and

highballs that Cheever lampooned. Right, “Pool,” 2024, by Wayne Gonzales. Photo by Steven Probert

As Cheever lets two realities circle each other, Neddy’s and ours, a disorienting doubling takes shape in Rider’s more cerebral selections at Flag. In Cindy Sherman’s grainy, black-and-white “Untitled Film Still” from 1978, she glares from the depths of a pool like a Bond vixen, big retro goggles perched on her forehead. In an unassuming 1991 replica of a New York Times page, Robert Gober quietly splices, among the banal wedding announcements and weather forecasts, stories of death and starvation, including Gober’s own imagined drowning in a swimming pool at age 6, circa 1960.

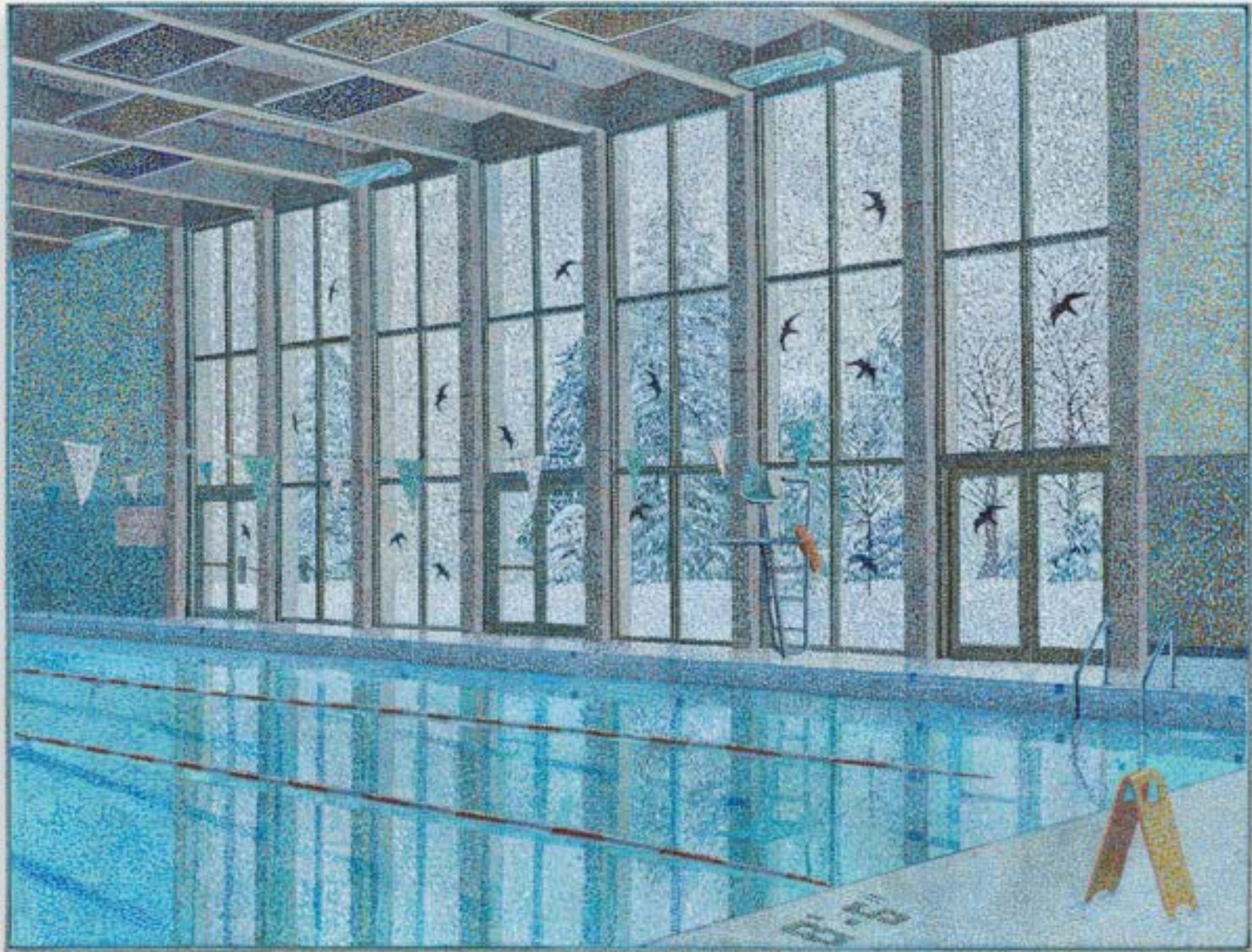
Sherman — and in some small way Gober — made their names aping the visual clichés of their 1960s American childhoods. Their younger counterparts in the Flag show would suggest a new Pictures Generation has arrived, one raised on irony rather than sincerity, and reacquainted with the paintbrush.



In a smoothed-over figurative style, Baby also paints a still from the 1968 "Swimmer" film, capturing the only possible, if hypothetical, homoerotic moment in the movie, when a foot checker stops Neddy at the public pool. Cheever was a tortured bisexual, and Neddy's self-concept as "a legendary figure" harboring "contempt for men who did not hurl themselves into pools" may reflect a crisis of masculinity.

The show includes, alongside Ruscha, a suite of 13 watercolor facsimiles by Amy Park, painted in 2016, of each page from Ruscha's "Swimming Pools" publication, down to the title and copyright. At left of the Ruscha set, six oils from 2006 by Conrad Bakker depict Ruscha's book in the hands of a reader. In feedback loops as insular as these, the pool, for all its fun, becomes an unmooring, a symbol of breakdown as much as class.

Cheever, after all, was not the first to take on midcentury malaise in pool lit. Preceding him was John Updike's "Rabbit Run" — with its mistress who bobs "in the water without weight, rounded by the water" — and Charles Webb's "The Graduate," whose futureless, free-floating protagonist found immortality when Dustin Hoffman played him in 1967.



Cynthia Talmadge, "Pool," 2022, view of a lovely stippled public pool. Cynthia Talmadge via Beth Rudin DeWoody Collection and 56 Henry.

The absence of David Hockney, the Rembrandt of pools, allows other artworks a certain fruitful ambivalence — a lovely stippled public pool by Cynthia Talmadge, the pink infinity of Roni Horn’s big glass puck — that suits the tricky task of literary curation. While “Joan Didion: What She Means” set an impossibly high bar, the advantage here is that depending on where you’re coming from, you can read “The Swimmer” on the train to the show.

In the final line, our hero reaches home and a terrible twist. There is something doomed in poor Neddy — whether it is the American spirit, you decide — and the show’s most disquieting depth comes in a deceptive set of large-scale square photographs by Zoe Crosher. Forensic in feel, they depict the sites of waterfront disappearances, both fictional and real.

In one photograph from 2008, what appears to be a random nighttime infrastructure, flash-burned and dark, turns out to be the pier where Dennis Wilson, the Beach Boy, was last seen, in 1983, before diving drunk into the Pacific to retrieve belongings he had thrown in years earlier. Wilson was the only member of the band who actually surfed, and was also the musician behind a concept album about that ocean. The tragic Wilson — fired from the Beach Boys — is the antithesis of Thek’s diver of infinite possibility.

In an exhibition of varied, heartfelt and brilliant blues, the water in this photo is black, and it drags us into the final, brutalizing word of Cheever’s parable: empty.



Zoe Crosher, "Where Roger Wad Disappeared at Malibu Colony," 2008. The show includes a series of images that depict the sites of waterfront disappearances, both fictional and real. Zoe Crosher

## **The Swimmer**

Through Aug. 6, Flag Art Foundation, 545 West 25th Street, Chelsea; 212-206-0220; [flagartfoundation.org](http://flagartfoundation.org).

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