What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in March

Want to see new art in the city? Check out Melvin Edwards's buoyant watercolors or a delightful exhibition of artists’ books.

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FLATIRON DISTRICT

‘Craft & Conceptual Art’

Through March 25. Center for Book Arts, 28 West 27th Street, third floor, Manhattan; 212-481-0295, centerforbookarts.org.

Reginald Walker's “Haqazzzza” (1985) in the exhibition “Craft & Conceptual Art: Reshaping The Legacy of Artists’ Books.” via Center for Book Arts; Photo by Oswaldo Garcia

The nonprofit Center for Book Arts has been operating for almost half a century in New York. Its history forms part of the story of “Craft & Conceptual Art: Reshaping the Legacy of Artists’ Books,” a dense and delightful exhibition curated by the writer Megan N. Liberty. The show starts with a timeline and archival ephemera tracing the development of artists' books in the United States between 1962 and 1996.
Spanning the same period, the books and multiples on view convey the force and range of the medium's flourishing. Fluxus, feminist and conceptual artists are represented, as well as many others whose practices don't align with specific movements, and resonances arise between them. The accented, hand-sewn stitches of Sas Colby's autobiographical “Lifebook: 1939–76” (1976–78) become sculptural threads anchoring books by Keith Smith and Cecilia Vicuña. With its rubber stamps and ancient lettering, Reginald Walker's “Haqazzuzza” (1985) is as suggestively cryptic as Mirtha Dermisache's “Diario No. 1. Año I” (1975), an abstracted, unreadable newspaper.

Liberty's premise is that when it comes to books, conceptual art, which privileges ideas over materials, is actually not so far removed from craft, which privileges materials over ideas. Her argument is convincing, especially when a single work seems to borrow from both, like Ed Ruscha's mischievous “Stains” (1969), a portfolio of pages he stained with things like sperm and cabbage. The lingering question, then, is why the art world tends to value one genre much more highly than the other. JILLIAN STEINHAUER