

The New York Times

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

By Max Lakin

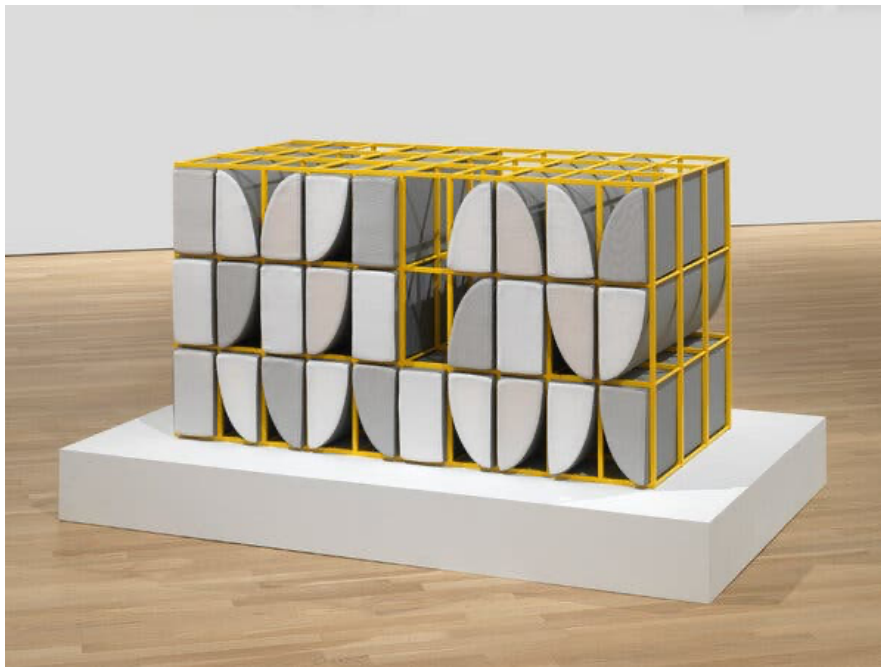
July 17, 2025

This week in Newly Reviewed, Max Lakin covers Nancy Dwyer's big words and a summer group show with some thrilling collisions.

TRIBECA

Nancy Dwyer

Through Aug. 1. Ortuzar, 5 White Street; 212-257-0033, ortuzar.com.

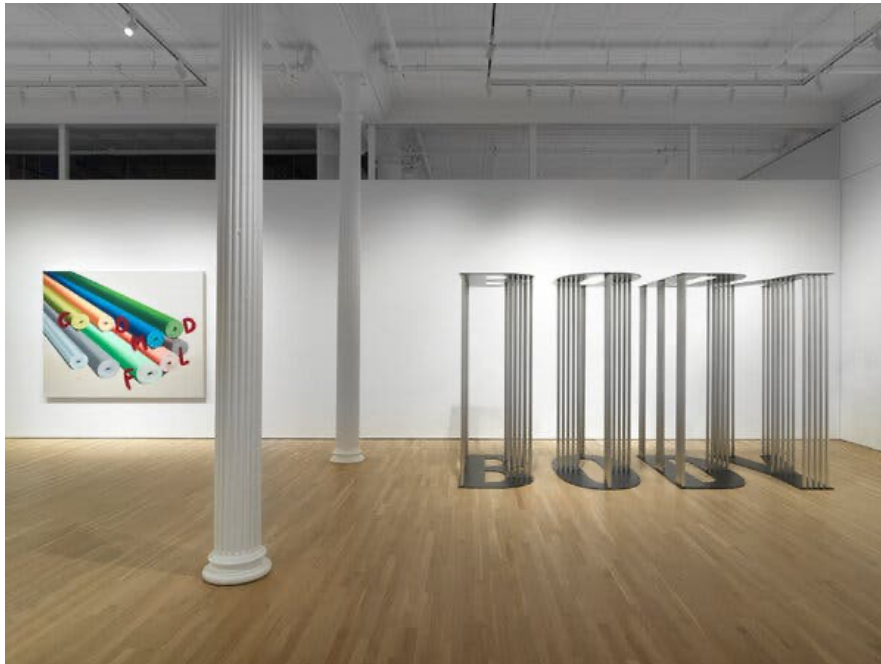


In “RELAX” (2025), Nancy Dwyer places cushions in an uninviting steel frame. Nancy Dwyer, via Ortuzar and Theta, New York; Photo by Dario Lasagni

Most people don’t think too long about what they say or the words they use to say it. Nancy Dwyer, by contrast, thinks about words until they inflate to the size of furniture.

Take, for example, the base of an imperious mahogany desk of the C-suite variety, which spells out “ENVY,” as if shouting the quiet part out loud. It’s from 1988, the go-go ’80s of Reaganomic excess, deregulation and other assorted sins for which we continue to pay. By contrast, “RELAX” (2025) dissects that word into cushions squeezed into a steel cage, a piece of hostile architecture that takes comfort hostage. It looks the way being told to relax feels: useless, infuriating.

Those pieces, along with a selection of paintings and sculptures, form this four-decade survey of Dwyer's deadpan conceptual art, which yanks language from the cognitive realm into the physical one. Dwyer is part of the cohort, including Cindy Sherman and Robert Longo, who met as students at Buffalo State University and emerged in the late 1970s as the Pictures Generation, artists who found something sour in the deluge of mass media and hijacked its vocabulary to prove it.



An installation view of Nancy Dwyer's show at Ortuzar. Nancy Dwyer, via Ortuzar and Theta, New York; Photo by Dario Lasagni

Dwyer's art, which seizes upon advertising's playbook specifically, displays both a healthy skepticism of and deep affection for linguistic elasticity. Unlike most of her peers, Dwyer worked unusually closely to the media she critiques, with a brief stint as a commercial sign painter, and she has the mistrust of a whistleblower.

These are serious jokes. By transmuting words into droll one-liners, she engages with the structure of meaning itself. She gives words literal weight, lets you walk around them, and proves they're no more stable for it.

Among a selection of painted panel works sprouting from the kind of articulating arms used to mount television sets, a profanely titled work from 2024 is the most elegantly rhetorical. Its query is at once incredulous and expansive, a response commensurate to the multivalent horrors coming at us in high definition. It's a channel that never changes.