Controlled Substance

Marilyn Lerner's Recent Paintings

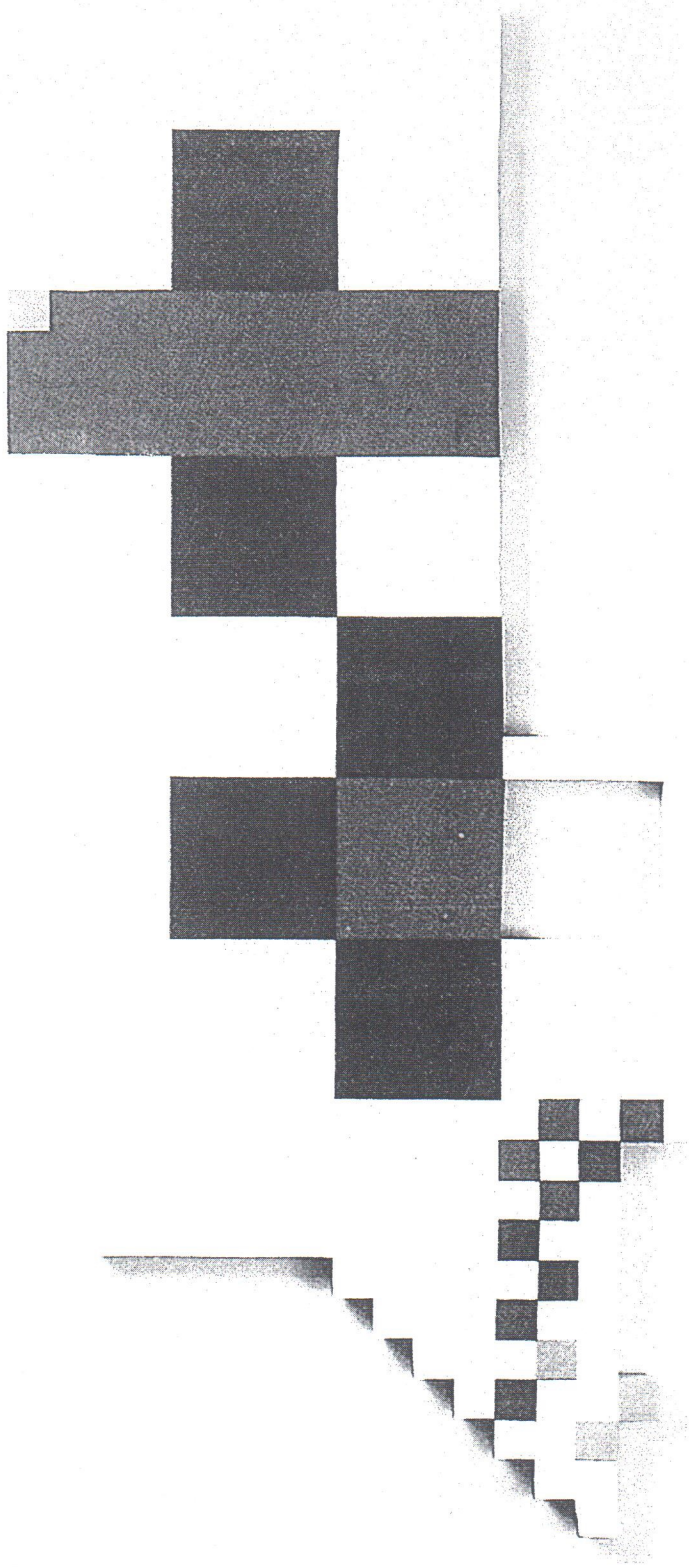
Terry R. Myers

Do you not remember the Javanese music, able to express every shade of meaning, even unmentionable shades and which make our tonic and dominant seem like ghosts?
—Claude Debussy to Pierre Louÿs, 1895[1]

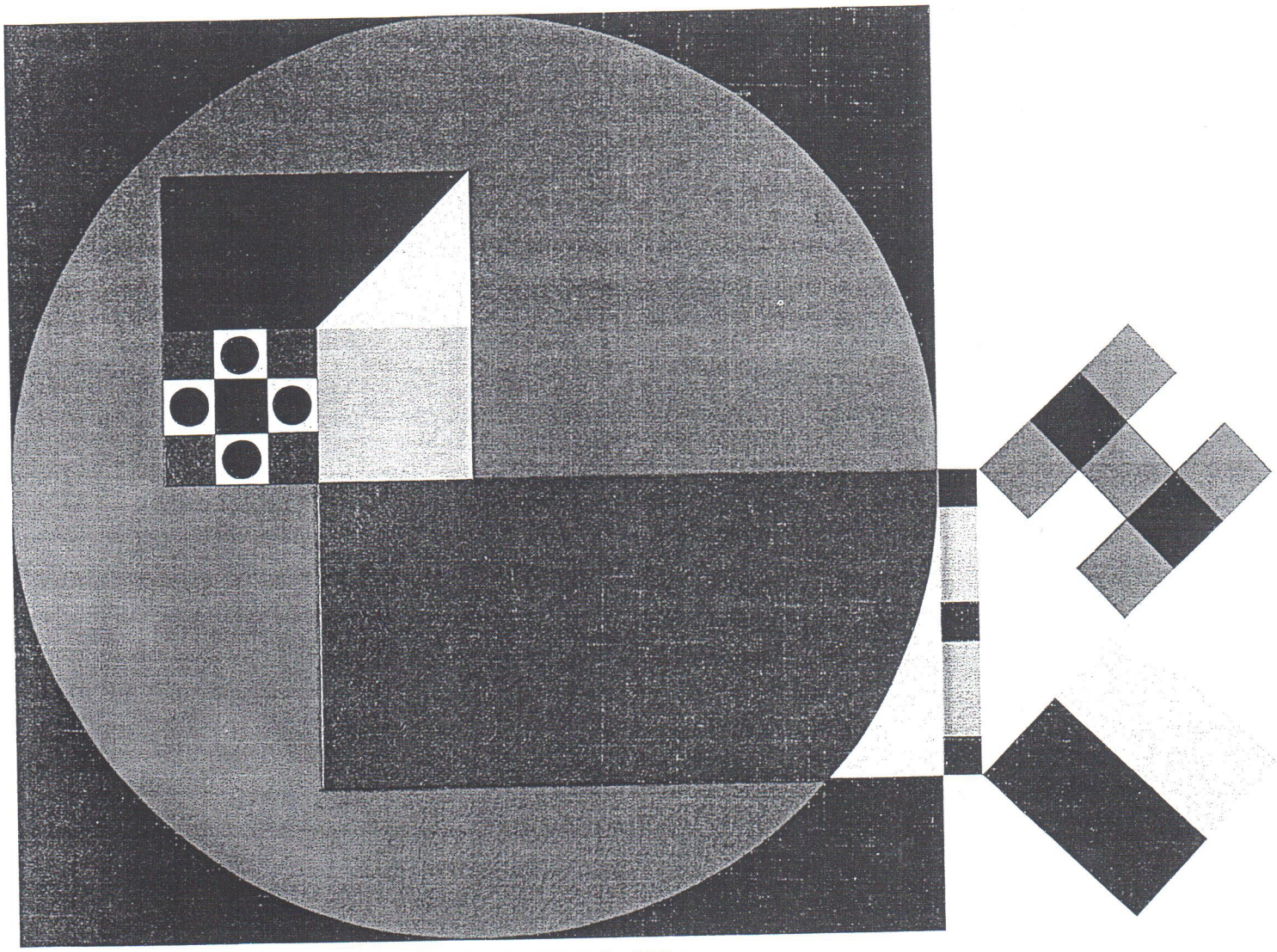
Marilyn Lerner's paintings are solid tessellations of material and spiritual necessity. Their patterns result from an exploration that garners strength from its willingness to function as a worldview. Lerner sees each painting as a new and complete world, a place-painting that enters our globe only on its own terms. Her sources are widespread, but highly concentrated. A formal debt to much of early modernist geometric abstraction is clearly stated in her paintings, but an accompanying sensitivity to Far Eastern, specifically Balinese, culture recharges what were once utopian templates with an individual vision that intensifies the viewer's experience of the work. Lerner's paintings are significantly about *layering*—a mixture of different forms of spiritual space imbued with the physical stuff of painting.

Lerner develops the format of her paintings in graph-paper drawings not done with color in mind. In these drawings she explores interior and exterior shapes simultaneously, meaning that inner structure does not automatically dictate the painting's contour and, inversely, that the shape of the plywood support does not consequently generate a surface design. This interdependence is informed by the basic tantric belief that the universe and the individual coexist as equals. In *Forms of Experience* (1988), for example, the relationship between the interior squares of the large panel and the two attached diamonds is one of parity. Furthermore, the painting's title completes its presentation as an actively autodidactic structure that edifies both the artist and the viewer.

While Lerner's paintings often formally resemble tantric mandalas or yantras, they also mentally approximate the stated aim of these religious symbols. According to Ajit Mookerjee, "Through . . . *yantras* or power diagrams, creation and control of ideas and physical forces are supposed to be possible."[2] Lerner's "power diagrams" have a similar function: the structural and spiritual wholeness of her work charges the space between the viewer and the painting. Her brushwork adds to this effect. A certain section of the geometry is usually raised by several layers of modeling paste, and the entire surface is activated by a repetitive



Marilyn Lerner, ***Spirit House***, 1988, Oil on plywood, 48" × 22". Courtesy John Good Gallery.



Marilyn Lerner, *Forms of Experience*, 1988, Oil on wood, 48" × 65½". Courtesy John Good Gallery.

application of paint that leaves traces of the hand, but is also in keeping with the work's unity. Holland Cotter was correct when he said that "The final effect . . . is one of rich material compression, as if energy had been stored, little by little, piece by piece."[3] Lerner's paintings prove that time and concentration are potent spiritual forces.

Lerner's recent work continues to illustrate her increasing ability to make paintings that are both intuitively and spiritually formal. In her 1987 painting, *Spirit Catcher*, a white ellipse contains ("catches") the interior geometry and does not release it, thereby making the painting seem somewhat constricted. With *Spirit House* (1988), and other works after it, the geometry of the earlier piece is released and expanded—it is almost as if the forms that were once pinned inside the overall structure of the painting were allowed to swing out and lock into place. Color is liberated along with form so that it no longer directly refers to its De Stijl roots, which are, nonetheless, still traceable. In fact, her color range—from black, white, and the primaries to less specific hues like turquoise and eggshell—is a daring mixture for geometric abstraction, and essential to the aggressive musicality of her work.

Lerner's reaction to Javanese music recalls that of Debussy, who was enthralled by a gamelan at the 1889 World Exhibition in Paris. The foreign rhythmic qualities of its playing offered the composer a new range of possibilities for the development of what would come to be seen as his strongest body of work. Lerner's paintings also have grown because of her ability to draw upon this same music as a source material for her compositions. *Jaipong* (1988), for example, specifically refers to a particular style of Javanese music. The painting's structure is not unlike the music itself—simultaneously both symmetrical and asymmetrical, its contrapuntal elements are firmly held in a rigid framework. Moreover, the repetitive, ritualistic qualities of the music are reinterpreted both in the painting's design (similar to a sacred gameboard) and in its surface texture and color, which bring to mind the harmonic minor scales that still seem exotic to a strictly Western sensibility—these are color-notes that are expected not to add up, but they do.

At the same time, the content of Lerner's paintings is enlivened by her understanding of the philosophical and psychological denotations of Javanese music. *Sphotavada*, the tantric belief

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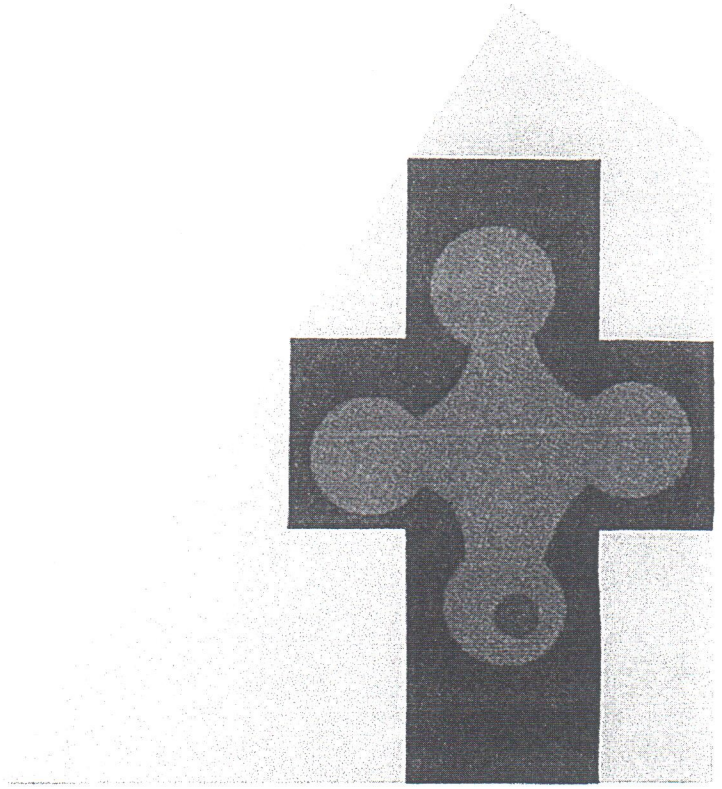

Marilyn Lerner, *FB²*, 1988, Oil on plywood, 41" × 37". Courtesy John Good Gallery.

that every thought (including color) originally come from sound (*nada*), saturates her paintings with the visual equivalent of a full gamelan orchestra. Her works reassert one of the central purposes of the mandala or the yantra: to diagram sounds first as visible light (*pasyanti*) and then as significant form (*madhyama*), in order that the resulting physical configuration be used as a spiritual tool. Color and form, for both the tantric artist and Lerner, generate comprehensive mental guides for concentrating the artist's and the viewer's thought processes. These paintings are psychological batteries—storage containers for a worldview.

When Lerner punches a geometric shape through one of her paintings, she combines two often irreconcilable ideas: first, that the painting is an iconic object complete within itself; and second, that negative space can carry a great deal of spiritual weight. Not many artists successfully mix differently charged physical spaces—those who do deserve serious attention.[4] For example, the irregular silhouette of *Spirit House* bonds potentially overpowering energies together: the cruciform pattern and color range, sensitized by their reference to some of Constructivism's strongest devices, somehow thrive in the midst of a surface texture (not to mention an open, yet *unempty* square) that is captivated by its own sense of mystery. Lerner has developed a vital imagery that is both obsessional and individual without becoming isolated from her spiritual and historical sources.

In *FB²* (1988), Lerner presents a painting dedicated both to a friend and to Forrest Bess, a true visionary with whom she has much in common. Her interest in earlier artists of psychological intensity is based on the implicit sensuality of their art. For some peculiar reason we frequently forget the libidinal potential of geometric abstraction—the confidence of design in Lerner's paintings unabashedly presents the tactile quality of their surfaces as extremely erogenous. She fits somewhere between artists like Bess or Hilma af Klint (Lerner has done a painting entitled *Conversation with H.*), who both felt themselves to be submissive conduits to a highly sexual aesthetic; and others, like Kandinsky or Mondrian, who were markedly self-conscious about the spiritual intent of their art. Lerner's painting process removes a great deal of her self-awareness while she is working, but her earlier diagrammatic shifting keeps the activity grounded in conscious thought. Of course, she is not painting in order to be nostalgic about some kind of mythological "purity" in modernist abstract art that is, as some would have us believe, no longer relevant. Quite the opposite—the emotional content of her paintings provides critical information for contemporary art. Lerner's works create havoc among most of the (usually) overblown current geometric abstraction now available. While lesser work is often braced with weaker ideas, her work transcends what are much more substantial source materials. And if these paintings are containers, as I suggested above, then they are not willing to hold everything in check—their sections of raised geometry should convince viewers that this art demands multi-leveled involvement from them by projecting its power into their world.

The viability of the type of abstract art that Lerner creates has been effectively illustrated by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's theories on nonrepresentation.[5] Her paintings do present a complete world, a place where language cannot even attempt to capture their full essence. They are mentally and physically about pure pleasure, but they refuse to be either self-referential or decorative. This is not outdated wishful thinking: when one remembers that the necessary goal of tantric philosophy is the unification of equivalent male (*Shiva*) and female (*Shakti*) energies, then Lerner's art likewise gains an impressive ability to provoke reflection upon the comprehensive experience of contemporary life. The wholeness of Lerner's paintings presents an abstract, yet critical, model for a vigorous equality—a condition quite unlike the strategic balance we rarely achieve in either art or life. □

1. Cited in Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, Vol. 1 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), 115.
2. Ajit Mookerjee, *Tantra Art: its Philosophy & Physics*. (Basel: Ravi Kumar, 1971/72), 20.
3. *Art in America*, (July 1987), 133.
4. In this regard, I believe that Lerner's paintings function quite like those of Budd Hopkins. Since 1977, he has been producing a series of *Guardian* paintings and Temple structures in which abstract form and high-keyed color coalesce, as they do in Lerner's paintings, into transcendental environments. (Lerner looks to the Far East, while Hopkins turns more toward Egypt and Greece for inspiration.)
5. See Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, "The Current State of Nonrepresentation," *Visions* (Los Angeles), (Spring 1989), 3–7; and "Nonrepresentation in 1988: Meaning-Production Beyond the Scope of the Pious," *Arts*, (May 1988), 30–9.

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