

HYPERALLERGIC

Weekend Studio Visit: Marilyn Lerner in Chelsea, New York

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August 10, 2014



Marilyn Lerner's studio, New York (photo by the author for Hyperallergic, all other images courtesy the artist)

I first went to Marilyn Lerner's studio shortly after I reviewed her show at John Good for *Artforum* (May 1989), and have gone periodically ever since. I have always thought of her as a painter. Perhaps that is why – in that first visit – I didn't ask how she came to be a painter, and, eventually, any questions I may have had around that subject faded into the background.

In 2010, I included Lerner's paintings in a group show, *Rhyme, Not Reason*, which I organized for the Janet Kurnatowski Gallery (September 10–October 10, 2010). When I learned that she was having a museum exhibition, *Circle in the Square*, at the Butler Gallery, The Castle, Kilkenny, Ireland (August 9–October 5, 2014), which has been organized by Anna O'Sullivan, I knew that I didn't want to miss the opportunity to see what was going to be in the show. It was during this visit – some twenty-five years after the first one – that I learned how Lerner came to be a painter.

Lerner studied printmaking as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin, where she earned her BFA before going to Pratt Institute for her MFA. Like many printmakers I know, she is meticulous. However, instead of pursuing a career in printmaking, as one might expect, Lerner began making laminated wood sculptures, partly influenced by H.C. Westermann. She showed these sculptures at Zabriskie Gallery in 1969, and work from this period was also included in the 1970 Sculpture Annual at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Although Lerner was gaining attention as a sculptor, she realized that her deepest interest was in color, and she began exploring painting. Because the apartment she lived and worked in



Marilyn Lerner, "Hand in Hand" (2012), oil on wood,
48 x 36 in



Marilyn Lerner, "Pink Oval" (2011), color pencil, oil on
pastel on handmade paper

was so small, she couldn't make laminated wood sculpture, which required a lot of sanding, and paint at the same time, and so she was compelled to completely abandon the former to start the latter. Such decisiveness typifies Lerner's entire approach to art, as she moved almost effortlessly from printmaking to sculpture to painting and, for the latter two mediums, teaching herself what she felt she needed to learn. In her sculptures, her use of laminated wood required her to build each piece from successive layers, and her paintings, with their multitude of colors, are equally demanding.

It seems to me that painting enabled Lerner to find her way back to an interest that began in childhood. While we talked about her interest in Javanese music, and instruments such as the gamelan and gongs, she showed me a wooden plate on which she painted a Balinese dancer when she was thirteen and living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She hadn't yet heard Javanese music, but she wasn't surprised by the plate when her mother gave it to her years later. Lerner didn't see the image as mystical or even mysterious; she was simply responding to what she defined as "an internal source of information." For me, Lerner's refusal to elevate this event into a momentous occasion speaks volumes, particularly in a world where the inclination to look for signs of genius in one's early life has reached comically absurd levels.

For Lerner, colors and shapes, particularly the circle, are synonymous with musical notes and vibrations. While she is considered a geometric abstractionist, I would align her work with a more archetypal strain that begins with Hilma af Klint and includes Rudolph Bauer, Leo Kenney and Charmion Von Wiegand. For these artists, the circle, which is a universal symbol found in nearly all cultures, is a form to be both rediscovered and made fresh.

In her melding of color and shape with sound, Lerner's work might also arise out of synesthetic perceptions. Like the Russian composer and pianist, Alexander Scriabin, who developed an atonal scale in which specific sounds and colors were linked, Lerner connects colors with sounds, though not in any systematic manner. It is important to point out, however, that these

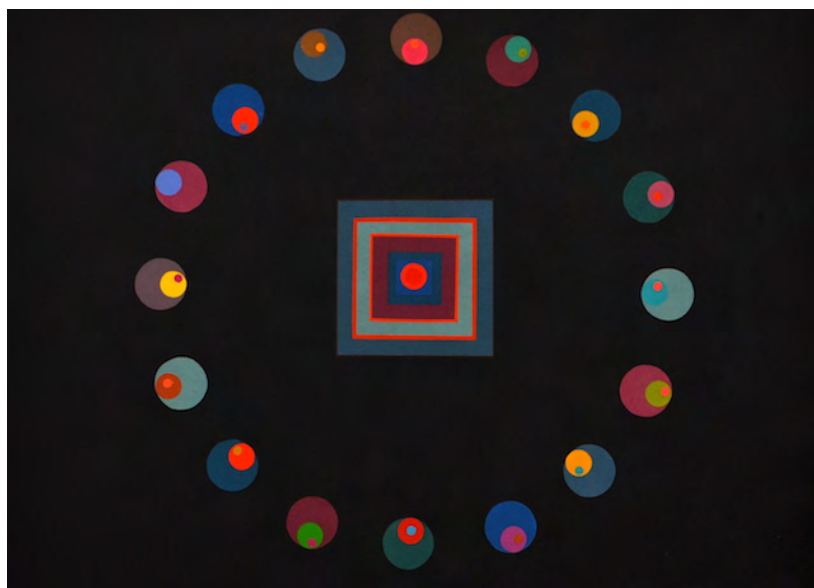
are associations rather than influences, and that Lerner developed her basic vocabulary of forms and her sense of color long before she learned of the work of Klint.

During the late 80s, which is when I first met her, Lerner was beginning to spend considerable amounts of time traveling. I remember her talking about a trip she was making to Bali, where she intended to spend a few months. In the winter of 1992, she spent four months in India on a Fulbright, studying gouache painting with a master painter and researching Jain paintings, with which she had long felt a strong connection at museums and private collections. She also traveled to Vietnam, Cambodia, Sumatra, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Java, and Thailand, and trekked through the jungle in the Shan State, which is the contested region between Myanmar and Thailand. On that trip, traveling with armed Shan soldiers, Lerner had to deal with countless leeches.

While I have connected Lerner to Klint, von Weigand, Kenney, and Bauer, and she has acknowledged her interest in Jain art and cosmology, I never feel as if a particular system of thinking informs the work. Too many unpredictable things happen. Each time I have gone to her studio – which must be more than a dozen times over the years – I see something that surprises me, both in her arrangement of forms and in her use of color.

Lerner paints in oil on beveled wood panels, which seem to float in front of the wall. She places the panel on a table and works on it from all sides, with the oil paint applied in a smooth, even coat. In addition to circles, her vocabulary includes triangles, rectangles and lines. In a number of paintings, she uses ellipses, suggesting that the circle is tilted in space. When she articulates a series of concentric ellipses inside a larger ellipse, but places a circle slightly off-center within the configuration, each form distinguishes itself from the others, while conveying a sense of movement, as if it were spinning. In "Eight Ovals" (2011), where each ellipse is enclosed within a thin wavy band that continually changes color, there is a tension between stillness and movement that never resolves itself.

Lerner seems to have combined aspects of Op Art, Geometric Abstraction and Pop Art into something unique without allowing a movement to define the development of her vocabulary. She is a geometric abstract artist who breaks with many of the conventions and



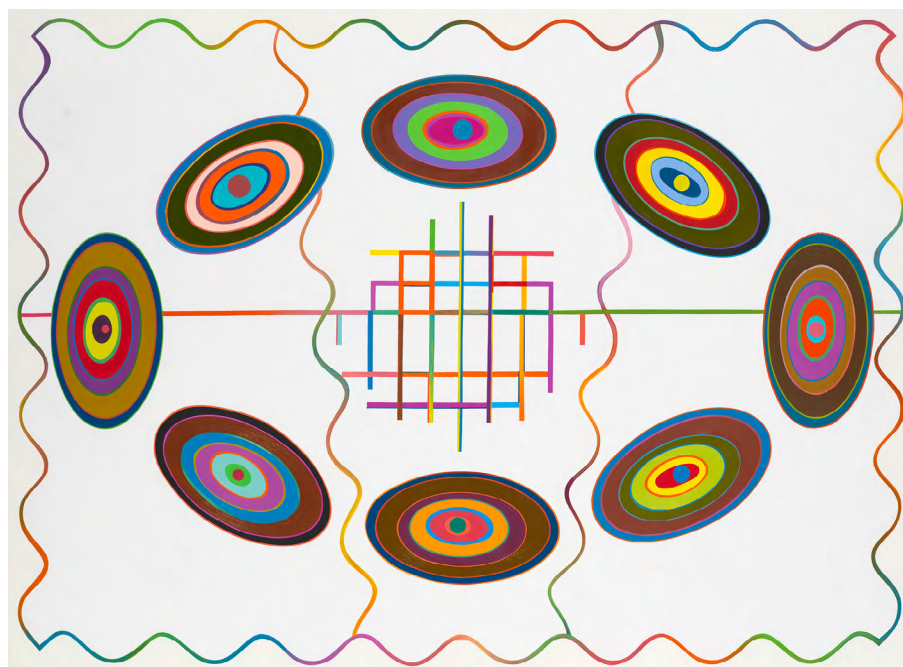
Marilyn Lerner, "Center Holding" (2014)

assumptions that I see as limiting this endeavor. Lerner doesn't rely on symmetry or balanced color combinations to make her work. Through her use of color, she undoes geometry's repetitiveness, establishing a frictional relationship. It might also be useful to remember Mondrian's love of the dance music, boogie-woogie.

In the painting, "Hand in Hand" (oil on wood, 2011-12), for example, Lerner uses color to undermine her symmetrical use of triangles. The painting's vertical format has been subdivided into four vertical rectangles, with two stacked above the other two. Each of the rectangles is further divided into three triangles, a descending acute isosceles triangle flanked on either side by a right triangle. This adds up to twelve triangles. Each triangle is a different color.

Here is where Lerner adds a twist to the painting. She overlays two small squares on the seam separating the upper rectangles (and their three interlocking triangles) from the lower ones. The vectors of the triangles and the seam separating the upper and lower sections of the painting determine the shapes inside this small square. There are seven different shapes there, with only two of them triangles. That makes fourteen more shapes whose colors are to be determined. How will the colors inside the small rectangles relate to the ones outside? While Lerner's use of color isn't systematic, it doesn't seem random either, and that's what I have always found both confounding and engaging about her work. It never seals itself up and becomes a system. For this artist, looking is open-ended and without conclusion.

Lerner belongs to a generation of abstract artists who stopped showing in the early 1990s, when many galleries closed and the art world contracted. As Lerner's large, thoughtfully organized exhibition in Ireland suggests to anyone with eyes in their head, she is an artist whose work has earned another look.



Marilyn Lerner, "Eight Ovals" (2011)