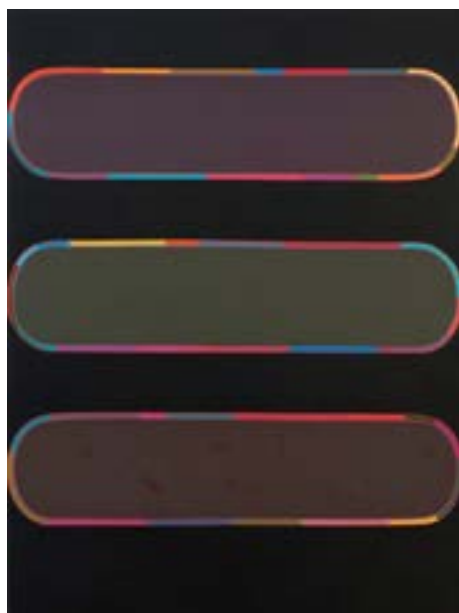


HYPERALLERGIC

A Singular Enterprise
John Yau
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Marilyn Lerner, "Inside Outside" (2016), oil on wood, 32 x 24 inches (all images courtesy the artist and CUE Art Foundation)

I have been doing my best to follow Marilyn Lerner ever since I reviewed her exhibition at John Good for *Artforum* (May 1989). We had both just become aware of the recently discovered work of Hilma af Klint – the subject of a revelatory exhibition, *Secret Pictures by Hilma af Klint*, at P. S. 1 (January 15 – March 12, 1989) – but it is important to point out that Lerner entered a territory similar to Klint's completely on her own. And this place, at least for Lerner, is the synesthetic connection between colored shapes and sounds. This is not to say that she has synesthesia, but to point out her ability to make a connection that few of us are able to do.

Lerner's heightened receptivity to color and sound places her in the same rarified company as the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin and the poet Arthur Rimbaud. I mention these figures to demonstrate the extent to which Lerner doesn't fit into the main currents of postwar abstraction, however attenuated and reconfigured they have now become. Her roots are not in Abstract Expressionism, biomorphic abstraction, Minimalism, or any of the other -isms that have occupied our attention since the 1950s. That is not something you can purposefully set out to do, though nearly everyone would like to achieve such a singular status, one that is seemingly free of precedents, and not piggybacked on the past, that is, unless copying or torch carrying is your thing.

In her current exhibition, *Marilyn Lerner: Harmonies*, at CUE Art Foundation (September 8 – October 15, 2016), curated by the well-known New York artist Deborah Kass, there are eight paintings, all but one of which was done in the last two years, along with two gouaches on handmade paper.



Marilyn Lerner, "Pink" (2015-16), oil on wood, 49 x 26 inches, private collection



Marilyn Lerner, "Overlap" (2010), oil on wood, 24.5 x 36.4 inches

Lerner is a colorist who follows no theory and seldom uses a pure primary. I tried to count the different hues in "Pink" (2015-16) but stopped after I got to forty, unsure of what I had left out. Nor do her beguiling geometric compositions follow any discernible logic. In fact, I have no idea why she divides the painting the way she does, but it never feels arbitrary. That's the power her work has over this viewer at least. I often find myself trying to distinguish the structure, as well as the connection between the colors, before realizing that asymmetry and symmetry have been fused together.

Lerner paints in oil on wood panels, whose edges are beveled. The skin is matte, smooth, and tight. In "Inside Outside" (2016), Lerner stacks three lozenges spanning the vertical rectangle, one above the other, against a black ground. Each lozenge is framed by a narrow band of bright, changing colors, which vary in length and are surrounded by a thin red line. Faint traces of blue appear and disappear alongside the red. The lozenge interiors are each painted a slightly different, but related tone; the distinctions vary from sharp to subtle. "Inside Outside," with its bright, glowing colors against the subdued tones of the lozenge interiors and the black ground, emits a continuous, soothing thrum.

In "Overlap" (2010), Lerner symmetrically divides the painting's surface into twelve triangles, with a diamond (composed of four triangles) bisecting the panel from the top to bottom edge. This precision is countered by the twelve saturated hues she picks to distinguish the twelve triangles. While there are two blues and two yellows, they are not the same. Lerner doesn't stop there. Rather, she overlays the triangles with four rectangles made up of evenly spaced colored dots, which change hue when they run across a colored triangle. Dots forming a pattern inside the rectangles contain a secondary, differently colored dot within it, though the logic of the change isn't clear. Wherever you begin to make connections, Lerner will break the pattern. This keeps us looking. In this, Lerner shares something with Mondrian: you feel the rigorous constraints and the desire not to repeat oneself and become predictable. And like Mondrian, who loved to dance, Lerner seems inspired by music and its internal, unexpected rhythms.

At one point, standing on the other side of the room and looking at "Overlap," I thought that Lerner had perforated the surface of her painting. It wasn't until I moved closer that I realized she hadn't. Floating within the squares and rectangles is a single black circle - something to focus on. This black is a visual anchor, which enables the cacophonous arrangement of colors become all that we see, transporting us to an unknown destination. Count the hues in "Pink" (2016) and see if you get lose track, like I did, at around forty. Consider how each rectangle, triangle, and trapezoid in "Back and Forth" (2016) is defined by its distinct hue, and how none seems to be repeated. The optical dance between order and disorder is supple and staccato, pointed and soft.

Lerner is an intrepid traveler and student. She has studied with master Indian painters, haggled in Turkish markets, and spent an extended period in Bali, soaking up the scents and colors. Lerner, who traveled alone to places such as Turkey, North Africa, and Southeast Asia during the '70s and '80s, has absorbed a wide range of non-Western sources. And yet the paintings don't feel appropriated or citational; they stand outside of those conventional moves. They are not riffs, nor are they meant to be spiritual. They are independent entities, things that exist for themselves and for our contemplation, a synthesis of sensuality, rigor, intuition, and austerity - an engaging conundrum. They are certainly not like anything else being done, and that is only the beginning of why they are remarkable.

Marilyn Lerner: Harmonies continues at the CUE Art Foundation (137 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 15.