

The Sounds of Music: Marilyn Lerner at Kate Werble Gallery
David Rhodes
October 13, 2018



Installation view, *Marilyn Lerner: Walking Backward Running Forward*, 2018.
Harmonic Relations, 1988, second from left. Kate Werble Gallery, New York

The title of this exhibition, “Walking Backward Running Forward,” is an apposite description in itself of the rationale for a presentation of Marilyn Lerner’s paintings from two periods: five from the late 1980s and nine completed since 2016. Amongst this selection are two rondos, from 1989 and from earlier this year, respectively. This allows us to connect persistent formal elements while also discerning shifts, albeit at irregular speeds. Throughout the exhibition, color and shape, though consistent as vocabulary, varies continuously: colored squares, rectangles, triangles, circles, discs, dots remain simultaneously structural and syncopated.

A fixation with time does not come as a surprise. The shifts in shape (of the paintings themselves and the forms within) and permutations of color amount to movement—registered by the viewer in myriad ways, whether perceptually, physically, psychologically, or spiritually. The paintings are static objects, but that’s where any stasis ends. The overall shape of the painting, always oil on a wood support, is more pronounced in the earlier works. But all the paintings are an exploration of the relationships occurring between geometric shape and intuitive color, between random and anticipated structure. *Harmonic Relations* (1988) is a white, irregularly shaped wooden panel, stepped like an inverted crenellation at its lower edge and curved across and up toward the left side. Across this composition, at sporadic intervals, are black, yellow and white circular forms, two containing diagonal sections, three squares and one a complete disc. They balance to a fluctuating emphasis due to color modulation—yellows especially range in intensity from cadmium through cream—and scale variation. The shaped support suggests identification with the surrounding architectural environment, the rhythmic composition with our passage through it.

Black Center (2017) is a regular, vertical rectangle that features, as suggested by the title, a jagged, black central area abutted by saturated color. Together with blocks of color, lines follow perimeters and cut across solid colored shape, further enhancing and refining this sensual tessellation. The color pulsates and enriches itself, Lerner always finding something unexpected and new by altering the mix, by responding as she goes along. Careful, methodical, and repetitive small brush strokes lay down the color giving to the surface a built quality visible up close but still felt from a distance, as the surface absorbs light in its slight unevenness in a way a totally smooth surface would not. The geometric composition is so fluid that it denies any rigidity associated with pure, basic form. As in music the cyclical repetition interweaves and repeats themes in mesmerizing combinations, like Javanese gamelan and Algerian Rai, a fusion of Bedouin and popular music that Lerner listens to. The radiant strong color that entered the paintings in the last decade happened after her discovery of Rai, when, as she describes it, her "palette exploded."

Lerner's aim has been to "make paintings that reflect the sounds of music," and whilst they can certainly be seen to be doing just that, the achievement goes much further than Kandinsky's observation, via Walter Pater, of visual art aspiring to the condition of music. The application of color free from any theoretic approach to openly improvised structures dissolves the notion that form itself is fixed. In Marilyn Lerner's handling, form appears to be time based, moving with the illusory effortlessness of a dancer's arms, as fluid as thought.