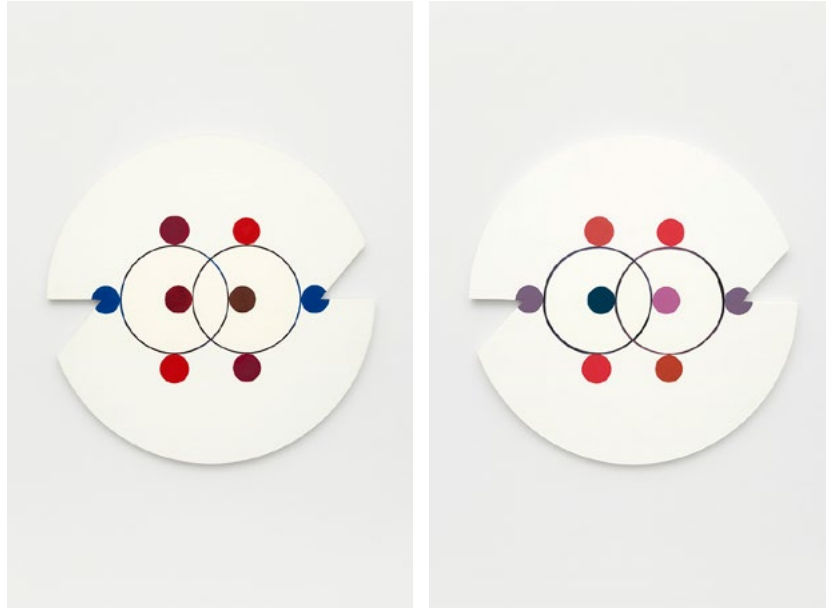


Marilyn Lerner: Walking Backward Running Forward

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Marilyn Lerner. Left: *Eight Circles*, 1989. Oil on wood, 36 inches diameter. Right: *Walking Backward Running Forward*, 2018. Oil on wood, 36 inches diameter. Courtesy the artist and Kate Werble Gallery, New York, NY. Photo: Gregory Carideo.

The music hits you as you walk through the door of Kate Werble Gallery, where *Walking Backward Running Forward*, a new show of work by artist Marilyn Lerner, is on view. Though the music is not literal, the work on display is saturated with color so rich and so vibrant, the room pulsates with its sound. Lerner has been at her singular methods of geometric abstraction for thirty years, and as this exhibition attests, rather than leaping from one stylistic departure to the next, her work exists on a continuum, probing her processes into ever-deeper realms.

The exhibition is divided into two groups. The first is a selection of works made in the late 1980s at the nascence of her painting career, while the second consists of pieces all made within the last year. Two nearly identical works, completed thirty years apart, open and close the show. *Walking Backward Running Forward* (2018), from which the exhibition draws its title, is the spiritual daughter of *Eight Circles* (1989), an earlier work on which it is clearly based. Lerner paints directly onto wood rather than canvas and frequently bypasses the rectangle. In each of these two paintings, her surface is a wooden circle where two triangular pieces have been cut out, so each resembles the shape of a pie with two slices precisely removed. Within these not-quite spherical facades exist twin arrangements of smaller, painted circles, with only their colors differing. The works hang in proximity to each other, *Walking Backward Running Forward* (2018) hung along with the early paintings in the first room, so the viewer has an opportunity to see them together before experiencing the rest of the show, and then again after doing so. It is a smart curatorial decision, allowing the audience to understand physically both the subtle flowering of Lerner's work, and also its anachronistic qualities.

The works of the 1980s hew to her early sculptural background where, in the late 1960s and into the 1970s, she constructed her objects from laminated wood. That builder's sensibility abides in the offbeat, physical shapes of paintings, and in her use of thick paste to build low relief into them, such that many are not strictly two-dimensional. *Full Moon* (1988) has an appealing, handmade quality. Here, Lerner centered a black concave circle hovering above a full white circle, ringed in brick red. Below a horizon line—a separate piece of wood that juts outward beyond the perimeter of the main panel—she has situated a checkerboard of smaller circles. The bas-relief black circle and the surprising slash of red-painted wood, along with the repeating spherical motif, indeed conjures the various phases of the moon, and center these primary geometric shapes in nature.

And then there is that musical color, which Lerner orchestrates like a maestro. It rings in the ears as much as it dazzles the eyes. She applies paint according to intuition, mixing colors that defy simple naming. It's difficult to see one of these paintings and say with confidence "that is a yellow; that is purple." The mind immediately combs for terms that might fit more accurately—is that daffodil? Is this one twilight? An early work, *Harmony of Elements and Directions* (1988), alludes to the euphonic attribute of her paintings. The piece's irregular, jagged edge is reminiscent of a staccato musical score, while the impasto circular element at center, done in velvety green-blue and ringed in deep maroon, somehow conjures the colors—and evokes the mood—of a smoky, underground jazz club. One hears the improvisational strains in her work. More recently, Lerner's palette has clearly expanded. One's eye perceives her shrewd gradations of color and latches onto them, as I did with a puckering mango shade mooring one corner of *Black Center* (2017). Seeing this peculiar orange rest so companionably with a cacophony of other surprising shades—avocado, dusky mauve, limoncello—is a slow-dawning wonder. Her tonal spectrum may be wider reaching than it was thirty years ago, but it is this deft application of paint that provides her sustained flow through the decades.