

NEW YORK

REVIEWS



Marilyn Lerner, *Geometric Point*, 1992, gouache on paper, 15 x 9".

MARILYN LERNER
ROBERT MORRISON
GALLERY

As many critics have noticed, Marilyn Lerner's eccentrically shaped, hard-edged abstract paintings often seem like playful yet exacting confluences of Russian Constructivism and Suprematism, on the one hand, and South Asian art—particularly Tantric—on the other. It's a rare synthesis—centrifugal dynamism from one source, contemplative metastasis from the other—but one that's compellingly achieved in her best work.

An inveterate traveler to Asia, as well as a long-standing admirer of its traditional arts, Lerner, in early 1991, became more actively involved with Asian art by studying Indian gouache painting techniques with a

traditional master in Jaipur, in the province of Rajasthan. "The Jaipur Gouaches," 1991-92, are the fruit of that effort, although despite the title they were not painted in India (where Lerner stuck strictly to copying miniatures in the approved manner), but back in New York.

Formally, the difference between these works and Lerner's earlier paintings has mainly to do with a new acceptance of the rectangular support, usually defined here by an unpainted border that frames the image as in an illuminated manuscript. The result is that the diagrammatic character of Lerner's imagery is more strongly marked than was previously the case. Even more dramatic is the increased tactile variousness of her work. While Lerner has always handled paint with a discreet subtlety of touch, her use of clean lines and purely flat, opaque color somewhat submerged this aspect of her visual rhetoric. In the new gouaches she is allowing herself to paint more atmospherically at times, and generally to give the works a brocaded opulence of texture that may well be too rich for certain tastes.

This brings us to the crux of this work. Lerner is clearly operating completely within the Modernist paradigm of abstraction derived from spiritualism—in the tradition of Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky, and for that matter of Hilma af Klint. That paradigm is undoubtedly a reductionist one: abstraction as a kind of Protestant clearing away of worldly imagery, of the material impediments to a purely spiritual apprehension of reality—abstraction as a kind of poverty or *askesis*. What Lerner has picked up from Indian art, aside from a certain technical know-how, is a feel for the uses of a wealth of exquisite material detail, something we are too apt to dismiss as mere ornamentation—that High-Mod-

ernist crime. In fact, it is precisely the tactile density of these surfaces that seduces the sympathetic viewer into an ever more prolonged contemplative fascination that suddenly seems to render those same surfaces transparent: diagrams of an interplay of abstract forces whose workings include the viewer. In other words, they achieve the perennially sought-after mystical concentration that temporarily effaces the boundary between the perceiving subject and the perceived object, the "highly specialized technique of vision" by means of which, according to A. K. Coomaraswamy, "the self perceives the Self."

So thanks to this work I find myself seeming to endorse a spiritualist position in art—not something I ever expected to see myself doing. Still, one need hardly vest any theological credence in neo-Platonic modernisms and their ancient sources to recognize that they led to the development of visual techniques for producing unusual psychological states. Perhaps it's just an example of the way strong art can force you to reconsider your most closely held positions. But beyond that, it's an indication of the way our theories of Modernist art, shuttling as they do between formalism and semiotics, have left us to fall back on a dubious, metaphysical vocabulary because they fail to account for the pragmatics of abstraction—not only what it may signify but, perhaps more importantly, what it may do to its willing viewer.

—Barry Schwabsky