

ARTFORUM

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Marilyn Lerner

John Good Gallery

A statement by Olga Rozanova, one of the leading figures of the early-20th-century Russian avant-garde, kept running through my mind as I looked at the paintings in this show: "The esthetic value of an abstract painting consists in the fullness of its pictorial contents." This statement, published in the catalogue of an exhibition held in Moscow in 1919, seems especially useful to consider now, some 70 years later, given the trend these days that finds a number of artists striving to put back into abstract painting what the

reductive Minimal and Conceptual tendencies dominant in the '60s and '70s had taken out. Marilyn Lerner, to my eye, is one of the most daring of this group. Through her own finely tuned sensitivity to the emblematic potentials of form and a broad range of influences, from her trips to Asia and studies of Tantric philosophy and Javanese gamelan music to the Russian avant-garde, she is creating a style of abstraction that deals directly and unabashedly with the deepest issues of signification.

In *Notes from Jalsimer*, 1987, for example, Lerner's main concerns seem to center about the relationship of time and light. Passage of time is suggested in this circular painting, with its measured composition of arcs and segments executed in black and white. Like a magical sundial it appears to capture time, expressed as the reflection of light from a surface that itself emanates a remarkable spectral glow. Note also the harmony struck between black and white, how the one is incomplete without the other. In the symbolic visual language that Lerner has been constructing, black and white function as both nouns and verbs. In *Notes from Jalsimer*, the white shapes seem to whip like flames through black areas, as if the two tonalities represented the forces of enlightenment and darkness. The artist's versatile use of black and white as expressive elements is found in the joyous musical notes these elements are made to sound in *Circle Dancer*, 1986, a composition that features sweeping, rhapsodic rhythms. Occasionally, Lerner has introduced brilliant phrases of red, as in *Floating Garden*, 1986, *Sangori*,

1986-87, and *Spirit Catcher*, 1987.

Throughout the show, Lerner has demonstrated how it is possible to free form from subservience to color without sacrificing the sensual aspect of abstraction. The appeal to the senses is forthright. Touch is stimulated by the outstanding palpable qualities of these compositions, with their luscious surfaces produced by the creamy handling of oil pigment and their precise, sharp-edged forms, some in low relief. However, bodily responses are the key to unlocking but one level of the rich pictorial contents that are contained in these works. Like the painters of the Russian avant-garde, Lerner is tearing down not part but all of the screen between the worlds of matter and spirit erected by the Western fear of the psyche.

—RONNY COHEN



Marilyn Lerner, *Notes from Jalsimer*, 1986, oil on wood, 24" in diameter.