

# HYPERALLERGIC

***A Show That Requires a Different Kind of Looking***

**John Yau**

**January 14, 2018**

*ROYGBIV* at the Kate Werble Gallery represents a diverse gathering of artists - veterans and newcomers, abstract and figurative, from Portland to Tehran.



"ROYGBIV" at Kate Werble Gallery, New York, installation view: works by Peter Halley and Christopher Chiappa (all images courtesy of the artists and Kate Werble Gallery, New York, NY; photos by Elisabeth Bernstein Photography)

The 43rd Annual New Year's Day Marathon Benefit Reading at St. Mark's Church ran January 1, 2018, from 3:00 pm to 2:00 am. One hundred fifty poets and others performed, with readers limited to two minutes. Everyone was assigned to appear during a specific hour with around 10 others. Here's the unspoken challenge: you get a single chance to be memorable, with the knowledge that the others scheduled during your time slot are thinking the same thing.

Admittedly, this is an unfair analogy, but it was what popped into my mind when I went to see the group show *ROYGBIV* at the Kate Werble Gallery (January 6 - February 10, 2018), which brought together the work of 10 artists exploring diverse mediums, including handmade silk rugs; HD video; textiles; bookends, Hydrocal, and epoxy; wood and paint; ink, pro-marker, and graphite on paper; painted wood; Day-Glo acrylic; and oil paint.

The title of the show is derived from the seven colors of the spectrum, as named by Sir Isaac Newton: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. The artists range in age from their mid-20s to their early 70s, and run the gamut from established New York artists (Peter Halley and Marilyn Lerner) to relative newcomers to the scene. They live in Portland, Maine; Chicago, Illinois; Tempe, Arizona; London, England. Shadi Harouni divides her time between New York and Tehran, Iran.

I went to see the work of one artist, Marilyn Lerner, knowing that I would also be introduced to work of artists I did not know. On both counts I was not disappointed. As there was no obvious common theme or medium, and the work ranged from textiles to works on paper, to prayer

rugs and metal bookends inserted into the wall, to a freestanding, frame-like, white sculpture alluding to architecture (just some of what was in the front gallery), one had to slow down, as each set of works required a different kind of looking.



"ROYGBIV" at Kate Werble Gallery, New York, installation view: works by Peter Halley, Christopher Chiappa, David Alekhuogje, and Marilyn Lerner

Here is where the Marathon Benefit Reading once again came to mind. You cannot listen to a succession of poets and musicians and others in an undifferentiated way: each individual or ensemble makes his, her, or their own demands, and you either accept the challenge or you don't.

Julio César Morales showed a video, "We are the Dead" (2013, with collaborative text by Miguel Calderon, programming by David Goldberg, and music by Shimomitsu), that ran a little over 14 minutes. A black-and-white image of a desert-like landscape filled with trees, their bare branches, is overlaid with pink and green geometric shapes that unexpectedly change in size as they move across the screen. Over a rhythmic, droning soundtrack, sections of a poem laced with violent imagery periodically interrupt the film, suggesting that what is being looked is a site of unseen violence and heartbreak. By bringing together four different languages (music, poetry, geometry, and cinema), Morales invites us to immerse ourselves into something that is at once soothing and jarring.

Nearby, Harouni has inserted three metal office bookends into a wall. The bookends are made of a single piece of heavy gauge steel that has been cut and folded. The artist has created a niche out of Hydrocal that matches the open center of the bookend. Pushed flush against the wall, the bookend frames the hole, while a lip (or what becomes a shelf) extends from it. Whatever is supposed to be placed in the niche (or might have been removed) becomes the object of our consideration. There is something very smart about the economical efficiency of these pieces.

The amount of time it takes to examine each piece should in no way be construed as a comment on the work. In Morales's and Harouni's offerings, aesthetics and social consciousness overlap, but in no way are they didactic. In different ways, many of the other artists in this exhibition do the same thing.



"ROYGBIV" at Kate Werble Gallery, New York, installation view: works by Cauleen Smith, Elizabeth Atterbury, Shadi Harouni, and (on the floor) Baseera Khan

Baseera Khan contributes three prayer rugs, which are on display near the front door. One of them features a rudimentary lunar calendar marking off days in groups of five, while another includes the word "iamuslima," while the third includes a pyramid made of pink triangles (a reference to Act-Up) and a poem in Urdu script.

Cauleen Smith shows pieces of fabric that she sewed together and attached to a metal rack extending from the wall. It took a minute to realize that each of three pieces allude to a time of day, which she indicates in her titles ("Territory of the Sunset," "Territory of the Dawn," and "Territory of Midnight," all 2017), but those times are evoked as place and possibly an otherworldly experience.



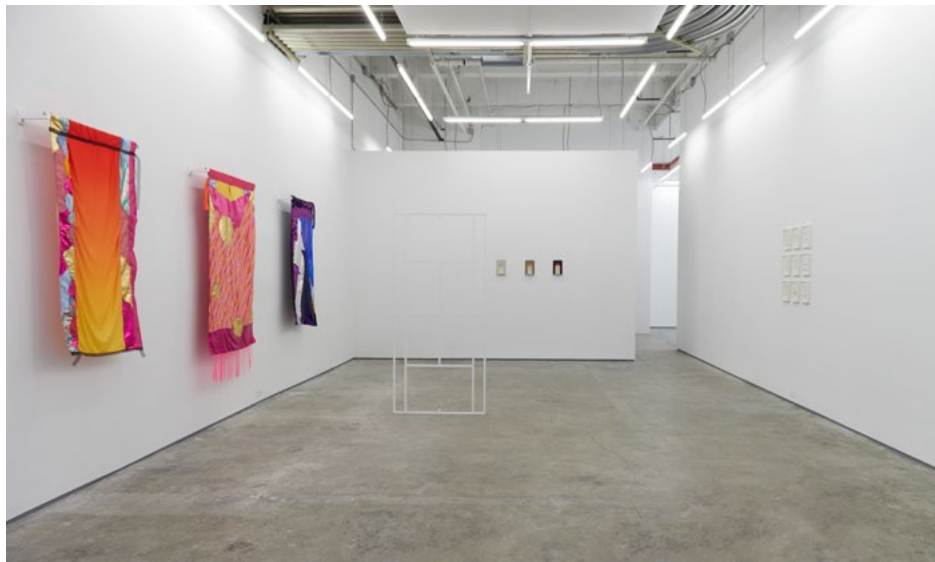
"ROYGBIV" at Kate Werble Gallery, New York, installation view: works by Julio César Morales and Peter Halley

Amba Sayal-Bennett's grid of nine small, framed drawings combine geometry and the diagrammatic to compose discrete machine-like forms that have no counterpart in reality. Each of the nine drawings seems connected to the others in the grid, but in no obvious way.

Is it possible to draw something that escapes known perceptual categories, including science fiction and the fantastic, or, at least, expands upon them until the point that the reference is lost?

Made of wood and painted white, Elizabeth Atterbury's pristine "Court" (2017) stands in the middle of the floor, a large rectangle sectioned into discrete rectangles by vertical and horizontal bars. "Court" seems to allude to an architectural blueprint or façade that Atterbury has stripped down to its essential diagram. In her contextualization of geometry with reference to architecture, Atterbury shares something with Peter Halley, who has three "cell" works done in acrylic and Day-Glo colors on paper.

David Alekhuogie is represented by a large pigment print on cotton, "Pull-Up K/W/R" (2017), which is a close-up view of low-slung red pants, white underwear, and a black t-shirt - three stacked horizontal bands of color. The immaculate red pants, white underwear, and t-shirt feel brand new, suggesting the image could be for an ad. While low-slung pants are associated with urban black youth, Alekhuogie complicates our perception by not revealing the racial identity of the person wearing the clothes.



"ROYGBIV" at Kate Werble Gallery, New York, installation view: works by Cauleen Smith, Elizabeth Atterbury, Shadi Harouni, and Amba Sayal-Bennett

Christopher Chiappa, who once filled the Werble Gallery with 7,000 fried eggs made of painted plaster, presents three painted wood sculptures on a white platform. "Composition #40 (Target #1)" (2017) consists of five small, circular tables set inside each other to form a white, black, blue, red, and yellow target seen from above. With the legs forming a multicolored cospice of vertical bars below, the sculpture is almost functional (though everything about the piece seems to rest on the word "almost"). In the red, black, and yellow "Composition #25" (2017) Chiappa's offbeat humor, impeccable craftsmanship, and allusions to furniture made me think that he was channeling De Stijl furniture designer Gerrit Rietveld through a Dadaist's mischievous sensibility.

**Marilyn Lerner's two paintings are on wood; each is divided into large areas (usually triangles) with the apex near the painting's center. The larger triangles are further sectioned into smaller shapes. "The Egyptian" (2017) is a symmetrical composition consisting of a triangle (or pyramid) rising from the bottom edge. A diamond, whose**

**upper sides are longer than its lower sides, is fitted into the space, each of its points touching one of the painting's four edges.**

**The interior of the pyramid is partitioned into overlapping planes - triangles, rectangles, and other related, geometric shapes. Tonally, the colors of the rectangle tend toward the red end of the spectrum, with a few exceptions, while the colors in the diamond are related to the green end of the spectrum, again with a few exceptions. Everything outside the diamond and pyramid is black.**

**Meanwhile, the diamond is pierced by a long black oval edged in red hues. The outside of the diamond is also edged in red, while the pyramid is edged in green. This element of edging hints at spatial dimension, as well as suggests that the forms are casting a faint aura.**

As certain sectors of the art world seem stuck in homogenization, it is gratifying to discover a show that brings together a diverse group of artists - of different races, ethnicities, and ages - without announcing it, and to see work that shares something with some works while having almost nothing in common with the rest. It is the kind of show I hope to see more often in 2018.

*ROYGBIV continues at Kate Werble Gallery (83 Vandam St, West Village, Manhattan) through February 10.*