

Laurel Sparks: Geomantria
by Alfred MacAdam
March 5, 2018



Laurel Sparks, *Middle Pillar*, 2018. Poured gesso, acrylic, ink, crayon, paper mache, ash, glitter, glass, and stone beads, jingle bells, woven canvas strips, braided yarn on canvas.

Many years ago I impulsively bought a small Indian painting. After I paid, I asked what it was. "Either a mandala or a rug design," I was told. Standing between spiritual complexity and hedonistic beauty summarizes the experience of anyone viewing Laurel Sparks's 18 mixed media paintings here. Actually, there are 19 paintings (one technically not part of the show) and a narrow wall painted a dense black of a hue Sparks herself devised. As its title suggests, the show gestures toward the idea of an installation, a statement that combines geometry with the repeated phrase of a mantra.

There is an unstable mix of elements in Sparks's work. On the one hand, a magic component—not the magic of sleight-of-hand or hat tricks, but the magic of religious belief, the magic of the fetish—the object that possesses obsessive power of some kind. For Sparks, painting is simultaneously a belief system and a way to create icons that put the viewer into contact with an occult power. On the other hand, there is the magic of sensuous seduction. The works are simply beautiful and express only their own aesthetic delight.

The show, excluding the mysterious black wall, which is both a painting in itself and a means to create a peculiar context for the work on canvas, divides into two discrete categories. The first, which the viewer encounters on entering the gallery, consists of five large, 66 × 54 in., portrait-mode canvases. Here the format is consistent. The surface is divided in half by an alley or vertical, rectangular swath running from top to bottom. One possibility is that this swath is a spiritual ladder, like the mountains in certain Indian paintings that lead the viewer from the lower to the higher worlds. Another possibility is that the swath reveals the dual nature of the human sensibility behind the paintings, the physical and the mental. While the division creates symmetry, the left and right panels are by no means identical. Perhaps this is the point. They



Laurel Sparks, *Jacob's Ladder*, 2018. Acrylic, gouach, crayon, paper mache, woven canvas, ash, rocks, glitter, cut holes, metallic paper, string on canvas

offer digressions, sidebars, meditations on geometric order in contradistinction to the chaos of Sparks's materials.

Just the ingredients she lists in *Nocturnal Dream Show* (2018) give some idea of Sparks's work as a benign mad scientist: acrylic, ink, gouache, paper mâché, ash, woven canvas, cut holes, gold leaf, metallic paper, jingle bells, rocks, beads, glitter, crayon on canvas. Only the kitchen sink is missing. But the heterogeneous mass she brings into order reminds us that the task of the alchemist was not only to transform base metal into gold, but also to transform the alchemist into a superior being.

The second set of paintings is in a smaller, square format, 54 × 54 or 23 × 23. *String Figure* (2018) constitutes a species of ironic commentary on the five large works. Here, instead of contemplating physical and metaphysical duality, we might be looking at an 18th-century aerial view of an estate. Buildings are roughed-in, lines of sight are marked out. That delineated space dominates the center of the painting. Surrounding and enclosing that island is geometry of a more traditional sort, the suggestion of a space the artist leaves untamed, while she focuses our gaze on the heart of the work, her utopian plan or map. Again, chaos or raw material is juxtaposed with an order that may be spiritual or even political.

Laurel Sparks combines many strands, alludes to many traditions, and evokes other artists (her use of rhinestones recalls John Torreano's use of faux gems), but her work is wholly individual.