



In an Abstract Realm

Its inevitably inscribed illusionism impelled Donald Judd to exit painting for sculpture, having never fully solved his problem with the narrative inherent in its rectangular repository of material, surface, edge and plane. In trying to make his work 'non-spatial and flat' Judd had to look elsewhere in his drive toward a reductive destination, a state wholly independent of anecdote. As such he didn't see abstraction as a choice, but rather as advanced art's true and pure language.

But what if he had instead accepted abstract painting – even one taken to the very brink of reductivism, the monochrome - as just one more genre, replete with its own messy vernaculars? Then, like still-life, history painting, hyper-realism or any other genre, that impure abstraction would instead provide an expansive field of play encompassing conjecture, investigation and experiment, rather than some narrowing end game. From a wealth of evidence abstraction has - certainly in the modern era - existed in an amorphous state, as a mannerism, as a democratically accessible and ultimately individualist platform for subjective experiment, its artists ranging widely, rather than falling into line on a march toward an 'ideal', Judd's or otherwise.

Of course, the fallibility of the modernist ideal and its end game is hardly breaking news, yet the vapor of the 'ideal' lingers on in certain quarters as self-styled quasi-revolutionary action. I'd like to think that in the expansive possibilities of this broader genre the abstract impulse would continue to be a meander, rather than a march, through a fertile field ripe with a myriad of regenerative variations.

But what of this abstract impulse? Is it generically inherent, or the result of individual, idiosyncratic sensibility, with some having it and others not? Or is it culturally inscribed, the result of a whole societal sensibility; sensibility being a rather quaint, old-fashioned term, but one pretty much verifiable when scanning a myriad of visual histories. If we consider Islamic art for instance, we find a highly coherent yet deliriously verdant visual form encompassing the decorative and typographic at service of a rich and quite specific cultural sensibility, but one shot through with striking individual contributions.

In training our focus on the striking and idiosyncratic, informed by the modernist era, we see in recent art-historical excavations ongoing evidence of an individualized progressive abstract impulse stretching further and further back decade by decade - as example Hilma af Klint, with her pluralist, mystic diagrammatic symbolism now seen as prescient, predating Kandinsky's own spiritually derived, revolutionary approach. Innumerable others since exemplify a teasing, a worrying of the modernist project - abstraction as apt vehicle in Georgia O'Keefe's alternately stylized and fecund interpretations of the American landscape, in Agnes Martin's careful mathematics, wavering pencil lines and transparent washes tempering complex emotion, and more recently in Jacqueline Humphries' evocation of the all-enveloping digital realm via her sly emoji-laden satires of heroic scale, gesture and seriality.

Jennifer Goodman came to abstraction in what now seems an inevitable journey from the facts of figuration to the elaborated fictions of abstraction, in search of a language that expanded rather than narrowed meaning. Her earliest work evoked the curvaceous body, yet a determination to shed the specifics of anecdote led her toward the modernist grid and an embracing (at least in the first instance) of its relative impersonality - in several series of paintings, works on paper and cut-paper collages that applied intuitive variation to symmetry and color. By impersonality I mean that by co-opting the grid she was able to enter a field where the work could explore a multitude of variations, free from the obviousness of biographic, figurative or sensual reference. Poised and insistent in their undoubted quietude, this series of works announced her mature embrace of abstraction as generative genre.

More recently, the predominant grid with its relative sense of orderly control has been jettisoned, as the artist further explores the limits of graphic form and insinuating color. The work over the past several years has to a large extent reincorporated the organic curvatures of her earliest work but without the figurative specifics, holding images delicately at the crisp cusp of abstraction despite our attempts to anthropomorphize or associate. Naturally, by breaking the grid apart (despite the few fragments that remain), she has cleared the field for a compositional approach that, whilst increasingly probing and free ranging, is also very testing - each painting emerging as a very specific individual. Though discreet elements might evoke landscape, others the flight of a bird, the rising of a moon, or even foreboding shadows, Goodman surgically undermines a settled analysis by a deliberate parsing of form and format through quite ambiguous layering, odd juxtapositions of color and compositional weight, and sudden shifts in implied volume.

The path from the body and its limits to the expanded space of the non-objective also begs the question of meaning, and it is in her subjective and idiosyncratic formalism, an individually distinctive and carefully tuned coloration, and her spontaneous performative composition that Goodman finds it. Though acknowledging close ties to emotional and psychological states her paintings are essentially studies in pictorial coexistences between balance and imbalance, logic and the illogical. A precarious place perhaps, but also one that an audience with patience and care can vicariously access. Though her works appears exactly planned from the beginning, with crisp edges and precise calibrations (even where a welcome if unsettling imbalance is ushered in), their generation is in fact the result of countless adjustments both spatial and tonal. As such, their success relies on an intuitive and repeated tuning of composition and a seamless resolution through a relatively austere painterly method - those flat planes that slyly appear to overlap in oft-illogical manner - cohering in very particular sensory and optical form that we eagerly access if not entirely reconcile.

Characteristic of these most recent paintings is her use of earthy grays and off-whites which operate pictorially as calming intermediate zones within the broader color schemes, grounding the work in the moody 'lower-key'. And whilst the juxtaposed terracotta's and ochre's should theoretically place us in proximity to earthly realms, altogether these remaining fragments of grids, the curvaceous and overlapping edges, the overall down-beat tonal range and her determined denial of figurative explication transport us into a satisfyingly mutable and meditative space. A place where push meets pull, up is down, down is up and form eludes function. As a result, and despite their undoubted poise, these paintings retain an air of serious playfulness - as elegantly destabilising visual conundrums that keep our eyes scanning as we attempt to reconcile the relationships within each image. With their curious and carefully contrived amorphousness Goodman surreptitiously lures us into the realm of a subtly confounding abstraction.

Andrew Browne
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