

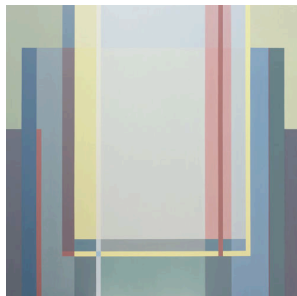
JENNIFER GOODMAN

THE BALANCE OF ASYMMETRY

30 August – 16 September 2006

John Buckley Gallery

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Where You Lead 2006
oil on linen
150 x 150 cm

Exhibition Essay

We live in a grid or more precisely a series of grids. The rectilinear system of organization is a given in our lives, so much so that it seems impossible to conceive of living outside its controlling structures. Since Mondriaan, Jean Arp and Sophie Taeuber it has remained emblematic of the modernist project and has become a signifier for the constant competition between the forces of order and chaos that would put contemporary life under threat.

The grid and the flat planes it holds within its web, and from which it is constructed, have been a rich field of exploration for many artists ever since. The grid, though denying development by its nature, has nevertheless been frequently embraced because of its defined boundaries and the challenge it poses to find new ways to test them.

When writing previously about her work, and in conversation, Jennifer Goodman refers constantly to the principles by which she constructs her paintings; harmony, balance, geometry, stability, structure, symmetry and asymmetry. It is the language of the grid, seeking edification from the givens that shape us. All her paintings are grids and if not grids, then formal organizations of flat geometric shapes that imply the expansive field of the grid outside their rectangular frame. Within these fields she is free to push at the boundaries, play with the possibilities of tone and colour, suggest new meanings and points of reference.

Her insistence that while seeking stability she rejects rigidity is an important clue for within her paintings there is a freshness and energy that is the antithesis of inflexibility, stiffness and severity. Although meticulously produced her works retain a vibrancy that belies their long gestation and fabrication. I have a passion she says, '... to tame the canvas and colours – to mix all my colours in order that they be specifically emotionally and idiosyncratically mine'.¹

This process of taming is more akin to domestication than repression, it is bringing the elements into line, socializing them within the Goodman code of practice so they can speak eloquently and in harmony. To enter this world is to be aware of the order that gave it form, not didactically, but by osmosis. We 'feel' the weight of forms, their sympathy for their compatriots, their lightless or vulnerability.

In *Zip* the weight of the cool blue in the left hand corner is palpable and quite different in degree to its Carmine counterbalance on the right, yet they both do the job well. They lock the composition down allowing the yellow 'zip' to sing loud, its echo picked up in smaller rectangles that pulse through the painting. This energizes every rectangle, all seem to be constantly adjusting to their neighbours, settling then testing the boundaries once more.

This is where tone becomes such an important agent. Although every line in the composition is sharp, almost razor-edged, the closeness of tone softens or blurs their point of contact so some are almost impossible to look at, the tone so close our eyes give up the challenge and leap helplessly back and forth from one to the other generating a new energy and, of course, a new space.

And then there is the veiling effect; the carefully constructed spatial arrangement conjured up by suggested transparency, as if filters have been applied to layer the forms in a sometimes shallow, sometimes deep, pictorial space. This further locks down the composition giving a simpler and more cohesive structure to the whole without losing complexity.

As she says, stability without rigidity, a sense of harmony and balance achieved through a very sophisticated understanding of the grammar of her visual language. It's not surprising then that Goodman is intrigued by Plato's notion of 'sophrosyne'. In the *Phaedrus* he explains the concept of enlightenment through harmonious living; and this idea of restraint to achieve gratification and the principle that through moderation and balance one finds harmony resonates in her work. As Rosalind Krauss points out in her essay 'Grids':

*The grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction)*².

Much has been made of the 'spiritual' overtones of the grid and its potential to break a path to a new, ultimate pictorial truth³ and certainly Goodman is seeking an inner harmony and sense of balance in her works, one that can be gained through contemplation. The structures she so carefully constructs are both the epitome of harmony and a catalyst for each viewer to find that sense of inner balance within themselves.

Her work is controlled, 'fine tuned' in her own words, so that each shape is determined to have its impact, each colour chosen to facilitate a reaction, each tone pitched just right. The correspondence with music is obvious and it is taken up by the artist in the titles of works such as *Tune* and *Staccato*.

In *Tune* Goodman makes the connection between a musical theme and the cadence of colour and form; the rising strain of a violin or maybe horn, the resonant hum of the Cello and the soft glide up a musical scale. But tune is also an active verb and here she is tuning each colour and each shape, like a piano tuner, preparing the keyboard/painting for the many harmonies we, the viewers, will play upon it.

We are actively engaged in these works, they cannot be approached passively, it just isn't possible. Our eyes dance over the tones as described above, shooting quickly or lingering on one colour after another until we 'shape' our own painting from the chords and notes she provides.

Staccato is an excellent example of this approach, the red notes are sounded in a detached and distinctly separate manner across the painting, with the blue and grey silence making up the latter part of the time allocated to each. It is textbook composition, both musically and visually.

To provide a *frisson* in her working practice Goodman has begun using collage and introduced a 'found' or 'given' element through the available colours of the paper she uses. Instead of mixing each colour and meticulously planning each minor change in chroma and key this new technique requires a compromise on colour that has kick-started new colour directions in her paintings. This new palette has been employed in the overall task of finding 'The Balancing of Asymmetry'.

In *Zip* and *Glade*, the compositions are basically symmetrical, but the asymmetry comes through the use of slightly differing tones and colours. In the other works the compositions are asymmetrical but the balance is achieved through the careful deployment of colour and tone. In this way Goodman acknowledges asymmetry as a fundamental feature of natural processes and, as in Oriental carpets, it is this playfulness with symmetry that results in intriguing patterns that replicate the complexity of nature.

This is Goodman's third solo exhibition, continuing a journey begun in childhood. An early painting made when she was just fifteen contains the core of her approach to image making. A delicate palette of secondary and tertiary colours, a geometry of interconnecting fields and the deployment of solid colour with crisp edges to summon up multiple possibilities of interpretation. As this work shows her career has been a natural progression, incrementally building to the level of sophistication and mastery she has now attained, breaking new ground but with the meticulous methodology of Matisse, taking two steps forward and one back to consolidate and review.

Ted Snell,
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August 2006

¹ Jennifer Goodman, *Of Tone and Colour*, John Buckley Gallery, Artist's statement 2004

² Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985, pp.22

³ See John Golding's, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still*, Princeton University Press, 2002