

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

Harriet Korman's Chromatic and Linear Improvisations

John Yau September 21, 2014

Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2012),
oilstick on paper, 15 x 20 inches (all
images courtesy of the artist and
Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., NY)

The key to Harriet Korman's work is drawing. However, until this exhibition, *Harriet Korman: Line or Edge, Line or Color, New Paintings and Drawings*, at Lennon, Weinberg (September 18–November 1, 2014) she has tended to show only a few drawings at a time. In this exhibition of twenty-one works, there are ten drawings done in oil stick on paper and eleven oil paintings. The drawings simultaneously stand alone and function as an outline for her paintings, providing a structure that enables her to improvise with her choice of colors. Her palette, which consists largely of vibrant primaries and secondaries set off against browns, ochers and dark violets, also contains some quirky colors, including different intensities of lime green.

Korman's hints at whimsy and disruptions of symmetry and pattern instill a remarkable freshness in her work. For the past two decades, she has divided the surface into a non-hierarchical, interlocking combination of geometric areas, which can be separated by line or abutted, edge to edge. In some cases, the line or lines a geometric shape seem to spread the color beyond its boundaries, echoing the effect of halation. But, as one learns from looking at Korman's work, every pattern, repetition or trajectory – all the traps that lull viewers into relaxing their

attention, thinking they know what will happen next – will be disrupted as the artist introduces an unexpected shift or change into the work. Such looking requires that the viewer remained focused and alert – it is a way of thinking about painting that seems almost extinct.

Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2012),
oilstick on paper, 18 x 24 inches

At the same time, Korman is not one of those artists who claims to be carrying the torch for painting. It is refreshing to experience work that doesn't rely on the WOW factor; doesn't exhibit nostalgia for Abstract-Expressionism; and doesn't require that things be attached to the surface. Nor does it depend on non-art or distressed supports; it doesn't celebrate materialist or fetishize materialist excess; it isn't made of images, appropriated or otherwise, and it has never played the bigger-is-better game. Her geometric shapes include wedges, diamonds, triangles and rectangles – nothing eccentric. Add to this language a vocabulary of lines of varying widths and you pretty much have an idea of what she works with.

Korman's approach brings to mind John Ashbery's description of James Bishop, another wonderful painter: "the stripping down is obviously a decision of the heart, not the head." Although I have no proof of this, I feel that Korman, who began exhibiting in 1971, internalized, brewed and melded together aspects of Minimalism, Op Art and Concrete Art, which includes the work of Max Bill and Richard Paul Lhose, engendering a kind of work that was identifiably hers from the outset. She was indifferent to Pop Art, mass media and cultural reference.

For this exhibition, Korman often combines two different structures, a diamond and a cruciform, each of which she divides further. All the paintings and drawings are untitled, as she does not want to suggest any connection to a real life counterpart. She isn't painting something; she is making a painting, which in her case often means improvising upon a drawing.

Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2013), oil on
canvas, 30 x 40 inches

A painting from 2013, which measures 30 x 40 inches, initially seems to be balanced in terms of color, particularly since all of shapes mirror their counterparts on the other side of the canvas. However, if you are looking at the vertical axis she has drawn from the painting's top edge to the bottom one, it slowly becomes apparent that the two yellows, oranges and olive greens are not the same from one side to another. The adjacent colors submerge but do not hide this fact. Once you make this distinction, you begin making others.

In another painting, where the shapes are abutted, she rotates and enlarges a form so that it suggests receding plane, introducing an illusionistic note into an otherwise flat composition. What's marvelous about these disruptions is that they intensify the logic of the painting, as well they remind us that each formal element (color, line and shape) represents a choice, that nothing is foreordained.

Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2013), oil on
canvas, 30 x 40 inches

The oil stick drawings are an exhibition unto themselves. One can almost detect a chronology, which starts with the artist using a dark green oil stick to evenly divide a rectangle into four sections, then filling them in with red, blue, mustard yellow or lime green. After that, she introduces a diamond and cruciform shape, which she further divides them.

Korman's divisions and improvisations bear affinities with the music of Phil Glass, Steve Reich and Terry Riley. Her color shapes and lines are visual intervals defining a rectangle or field, forming clusters that go from short to long, dissolve and reconfigure. It is not the repetition that the viewer finds entrancing, but the subtle shifts and unexpected jumps, all held tightly in place by the hybrid structure, which often combines a cruciform and diamond.

Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2013), oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

Korman's paintings and drawings might look simple, but they are not. There is a quietly brilliant flair to this work, which never tries to be overtly dramatic or make a large claim. To my mind, they don't have to. There is something so solid and

satisfying to these paintings and drawings that I only wish that she will soon get the museum show that she has long deserved.

Harriet Korman: Line or Edge, Line or Color, New Paintings and Drawings continues at Lennon, Weinberg Inc. (514 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 1.

MORE FROM HYPERALLERGIC