

BROOKLYN RAIL

Harriet Korman: *Housing Developments*

By Tom McGlynn



Installation view: *Harriet Korman: Housing Development: New Paintings and Drawings*, Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, 2025. Courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery. Photo: Sabrina Slavin.

Harriet Korman's recent works reflect her long-standing commitment to using direct form as content. And it wouldn't be far off the mark to regard her as a latter-day incarnation of the abstract symbolist—a term coined by Irving Sandler to characterize Adolph Gottlieb, whose late works synthesized and symbolically conceptualized the gestural and color field tangents of the New York School.

Housing Development: New Paintings and Drawings
Thomas Erben Gallery
September 11–October 25,
2025
New York

Korman, however, dispenses with the archetypal mythos of that lineage, aiming instead to realize in her imagery a symbol of the present—an essence of painting in dialogue with its contemporary moment. Yet spending time with her paintings, one discovers, refreshingly, that she's a rather unmannered essentialist. Her seemingly straightforward compositional motifs (grids, nesting rectangles, and cruciform) unfold into a ludic variety of sonorous structures. They resist reductive interpretation, refusing to settle into mere exercises in formalism. This is central to Korman's sensibility. Her paintings invite the viewer into a dynamic perceptual space, where compositional simplicity veils complex tensions. These tensions arise, in part, from her nuanced handling of the boundary between drawing and painting, and her intuitive sense of color as form.



Harriet Korman, *Untitled*, 2023, Oil on canvas, 48 × 52 inches. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery.

All of the works in the show are untitled, a hallmark of the artist's practice and a reflection of their resistance to a priori interpretation. Most of the canvases measure 48 by 60 inches. In each of the paintings and works on paper a linear diagram recurs, interposing strident color juxtapositions. The thickness of the painted diagrams hovers around one inch, with minor variations within specific works. The foregrounding of this diagrammatic strategy echoes some of the artist's strongly outlined compositions dating to 2013–14 and establishes a transparent, monochromatic (most of the lines are dark brown) symmetry in concert with her palette's general tendency toward the triadic rudimentary. For example, in one of the more basic compositions from 2024, a central diagonal line nesting within bordering rectangles symmetrically bisects the canvas, separating two areas of highly saturated yellow and blue topped by a red orange. This array is deftly modulated by undersaturated secondary colors in the bordering "frame," effecting a classical strategy of darks crowding the lights. In another more complex and slightly smaller canvas from 2023, Korman utilizes a similar rectangular framing lattice surrounding a foursquare center. Her palette here is somewhat anomalous to the rest of the exhibited canvases in that it establishes a more subdued harmony in analogous yellows, oranges, and greens. Notable in this painting, too, is the introduction of four gestural strokes (two oranges on yellow, two yellows on orange, in a mirroring arrangement) sequestered within the bordering proportions. Alternatively, a larger painting from 2024 inverts the crowded lights of these two previous compositions by pushing two rectangles of saturated yellow to the periphery of the predominantly darker valued hues in the central grid. This surprising implication of peripheral vision blithely circumvents any attempt to generalize about the artist's inclination toward a hieratic central image. Korman's pronounced use of the grid device aligns closely with Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "diagram," as presented in his 1981 lectures on painting. Deleuze explains, "That's what the variability of a diagram is. The diagram is, in fact, a chance for infinite paintings ... it means that [painters] never finish ... analyzing their diagram."¹ In these works, Korman's basic deployment of a literal diagram discloses a fertile complexity at the heart of her broader practice. Her diagrammatic directness girds a polyvalent painterly logic that reveals itself gradually with sustained attention.



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On one wall of the gallery hangs a grid of the artist's relatively small works on paper (all measuring 11 by 13 inches), executed in a pulpy oilstick. In a previous statement reflecting on earlier work, Korman notes: "I even worked with visualizing the results of the process, and then just painting that image, sort of a facsimile or fabrication of the process."² These oilstick drawings are notably looser than the canvases, a quality engendered by the medium's broader gestural capacity. This looseness offsets the harder-edged pithiness that defines the paintings, modulating their vibrancy into something more poignant, even tender. In these smaller works, too, one can discern a sequential rhythm inherent to the artist's serial morphology. Perhaps the show's title, *Housing Development*, is meant to be read in duplex fashion: referencing both the basic box-and-gable structure of a house—a compositional device that recurs in one of the paintings—and the esoteric notion of abstract constructs that "house" themselves. Therein is niched the animus of Korman's abstract symbolism.

1. Gilles Deleuze, *On Painting: Courses, March-June, 1981* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2025), 35.

2. Harriet Korman, *Notes on Painting 1969–2019* (New York: Thomas Erben Gallery, 2020).

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