

## Harriet Korman

### *Permeable/Resistant: Recent Drawings and Paintings*



Left: Untitled, 2015. Oil stick on paper 12 x 16 in.

Right: Untitled, 2017. Oil on canvas, 40 x 52 in.

November 1 - December 21, 2018

Thomas Erben Gallery is very excited to present a solo exhibition with New York-based painter **Harriet Korman**. The artist previously participated in two of our group shows, *Painting in due time* (2017) and *of certain instability* (2011).

Presenting a new body of work, Korman continues her celebrated engagement with color, geometry, the picture plane, paint, and her handling of it. With such interests, Korman has frequently been cited as a champion of geometric abstraction or cast as a colorist: roles she has subtly sidestepped for decades. Countering an understanding of her work that can often be too programmatic, this new series steers towards her work's ability to surprise. *Permeable/Resistant* captures Korman where she often works: challenging and disrupting first impressions.

Varying between loose, rapid (oilstick) drawings and slow deliberate (oil) paintings, the exhibition opens a space to the genial directness of Korman's work, a recognition that bespeaks the personal quality of her art. The exhibition flows with colors, rhythm, structure, intensity, and more than a few variances—often the lines in her paintings don't match up; what appears to be symmetrical is not; clean edges are betrayed by their undisguised hand-painted nature; surfaces vary due to the materiality of the paints she applied.

Embarking on this new body of work, drawing in oilstick, a quadrant format emerged that became the series. Some of these were then reworked into oil paintings. Reflecting on this process, Korman noted how, "The transformation of the loose, quick drawings to a slow deliberate painting is curious. Like a translation, once removed from the original, there is a quirkiness and unpredictability."

Immediately striking is the intensity of Korman's colors; they project a particular clarity and strength. This is in part due to Korman's decision in 1996 to not add white into her colors. One reason for this radical decision was that lighter values usually allude to light and space—not an interest of hers. Another was to see the true intensity and beauty of the color right out of the tube. And while she does not mix in white, Korman frequently uses earth colors along with the highly saturated hues, adding an additional dimension to their initial, immediate appeal.

"This makes sense to me", Korman has explained, testifying to the matter-of-factness, a quiet sense, and the personal aspects, all present in her work. In this way, *Permeable/Resistant* tends to mirror some of the simplicity, use of geometry, and directness in two artists Korman particularly admires: Sol Lewitt and Louis Kahn. Indeed, by pairing her recent output in painting and drawing, *Permeable/Resistant* hints to that particular constant in Korman's work: its ability to be simultaneously complex and uncomplicated, enduring and personal.



Installation view: West and North walls



*Untitled*, 2015  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40 in.



*Untitled*, 2015  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40 in.



*Untitled*, 2016  
Oil on canvas  
48 x 60 in.



*Untitled*, 2016  
Oil on canvas  
40 x 52 in.



*Untitled, 2015*  
Oilstick on paper  
12 x 16 in.



Installation view: North and West walls





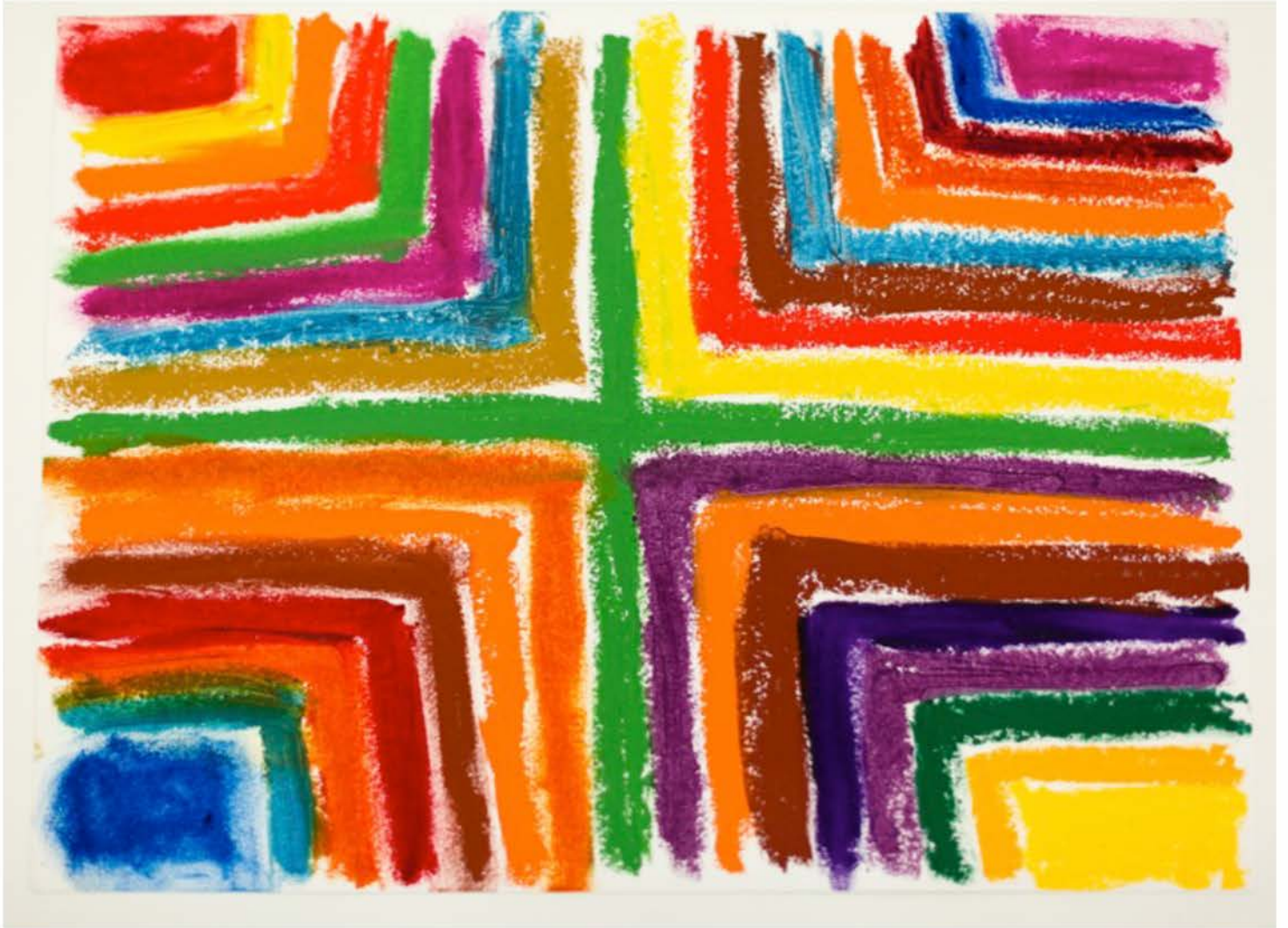
*Untitled, 2016*  
Oil on canvas  
40 x 52 in.



*Untitled, 2017*  
Oil on canvas  
48 x 60 in.



Installation view: North and West walls



*Untitled*, 2015  
Oilstick on paper  
12 x 16 in.



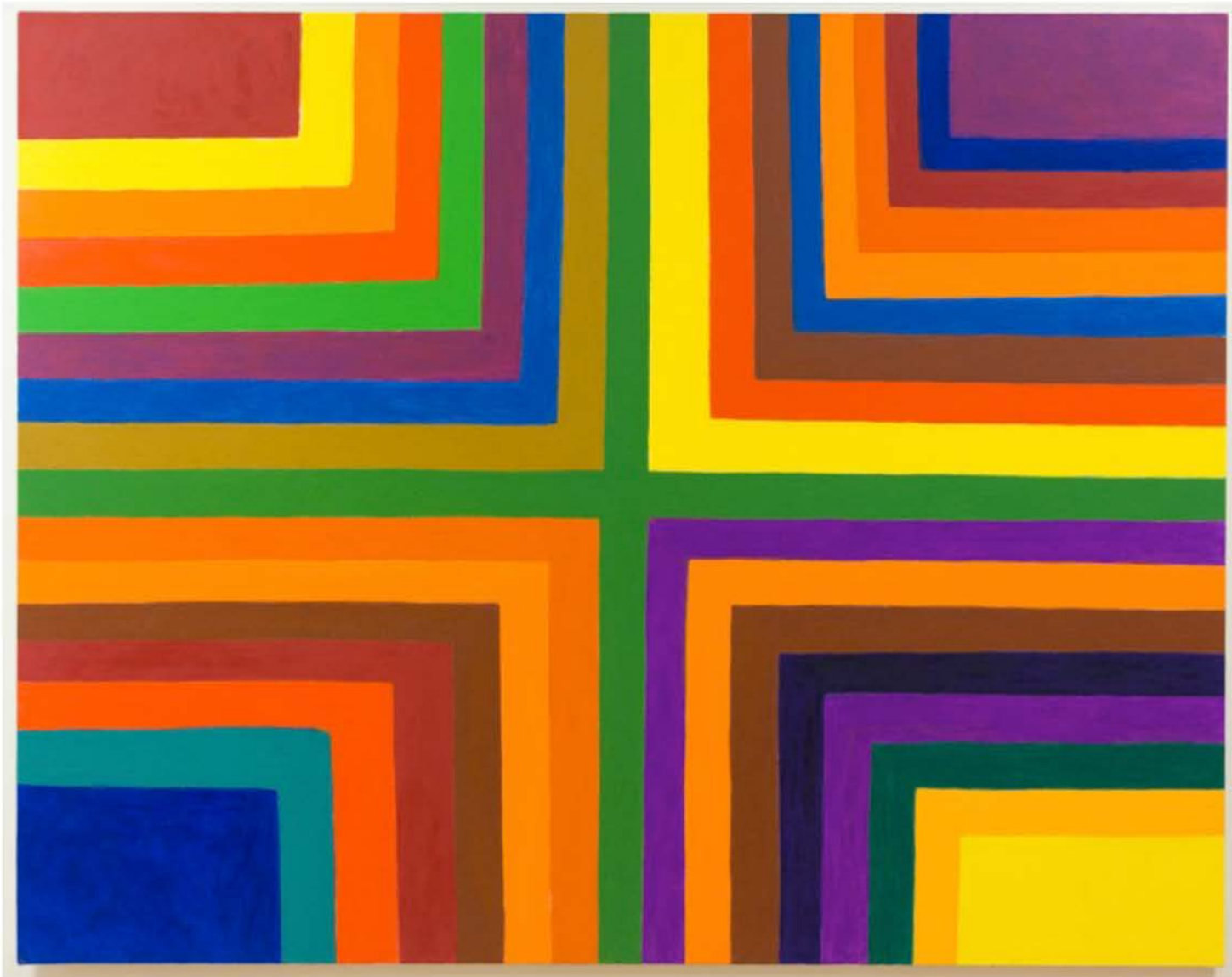
Installation view: East and South walls



Installation view: South wall

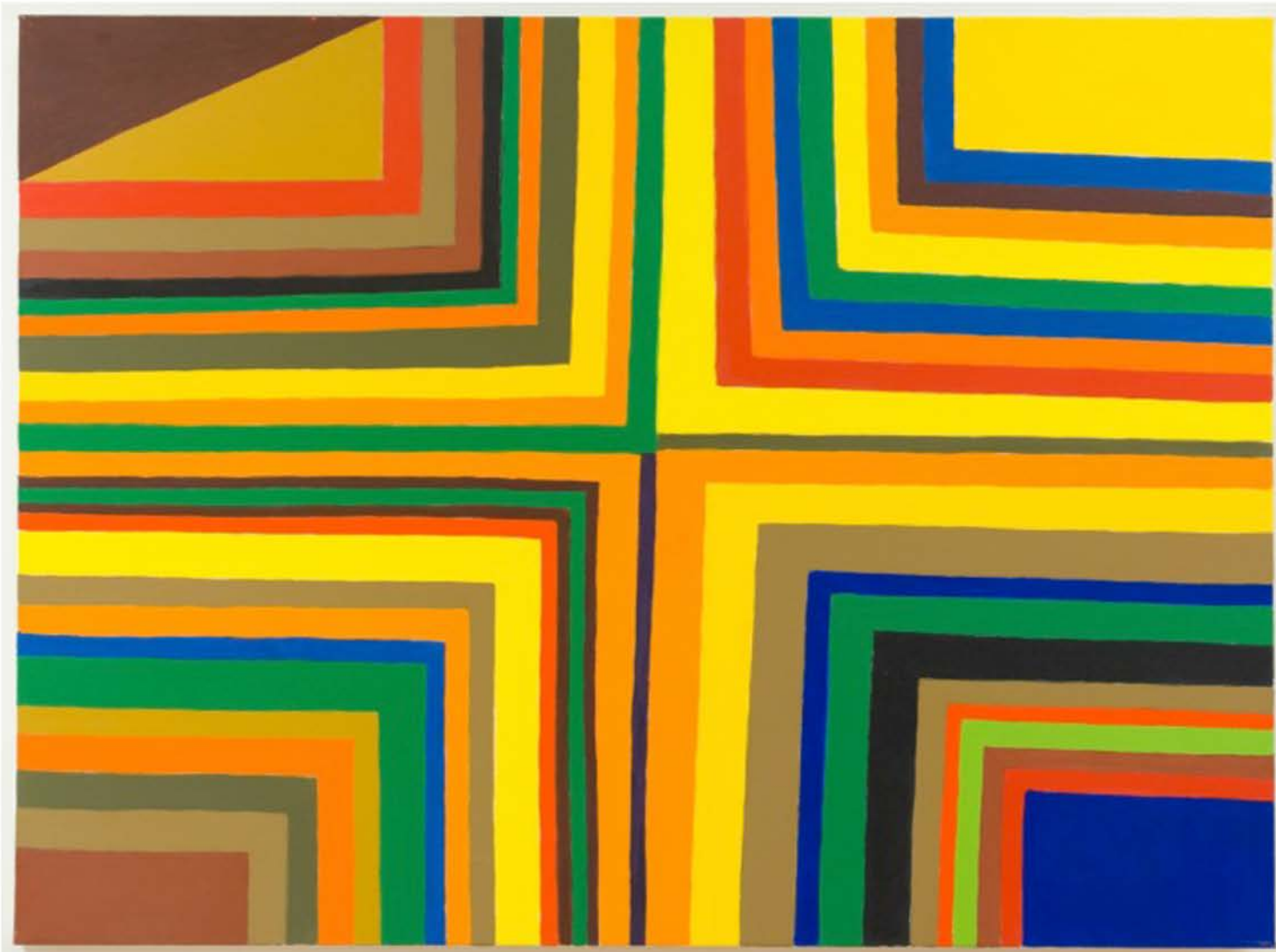


*Untitled, 2017*  
Oil on canvas  
40 x 52 in.



*Untitled*, 2017  
Oil on canvas  
40 x 52 in.

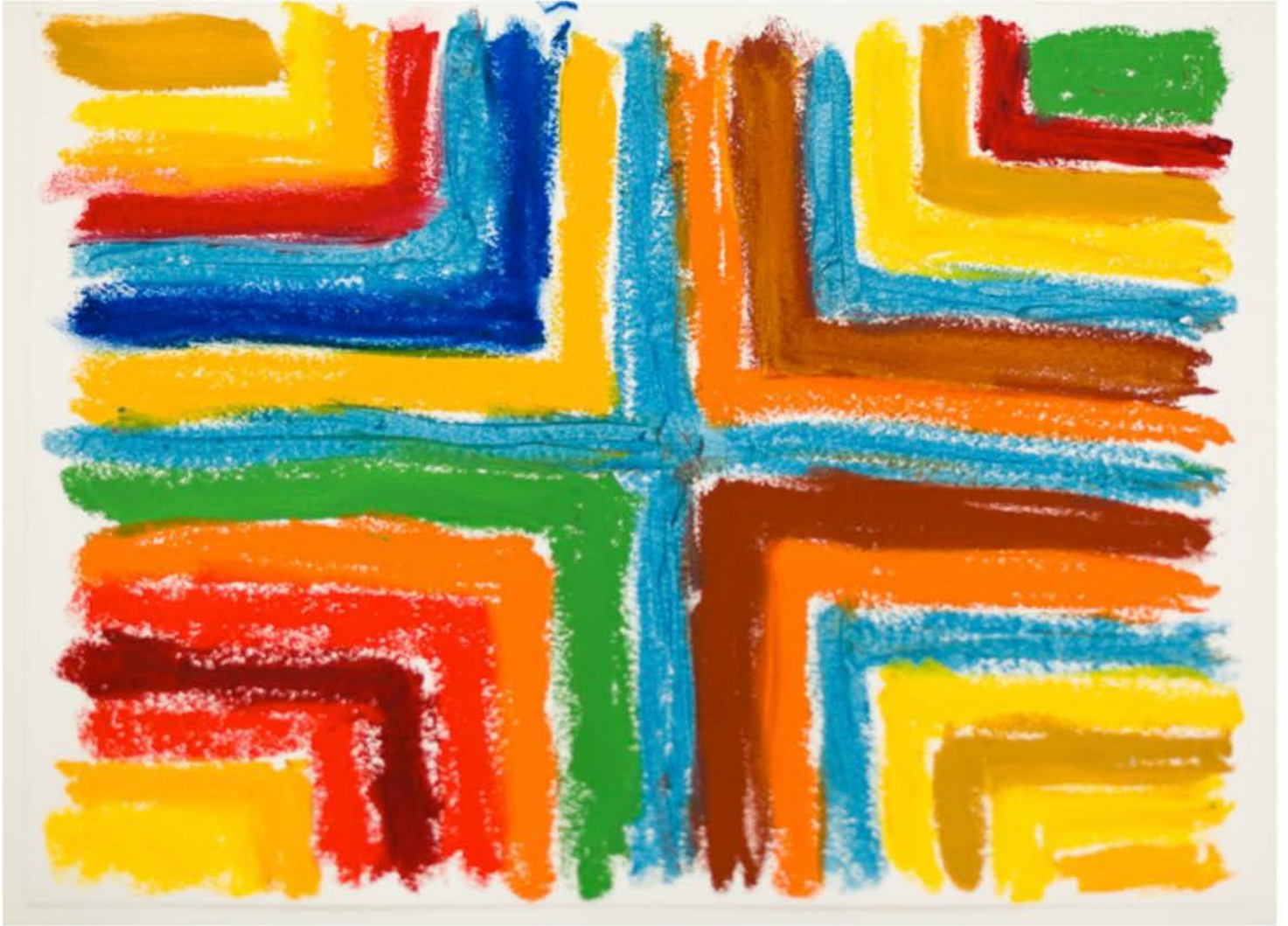




*Untitled*, 2015  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40in.



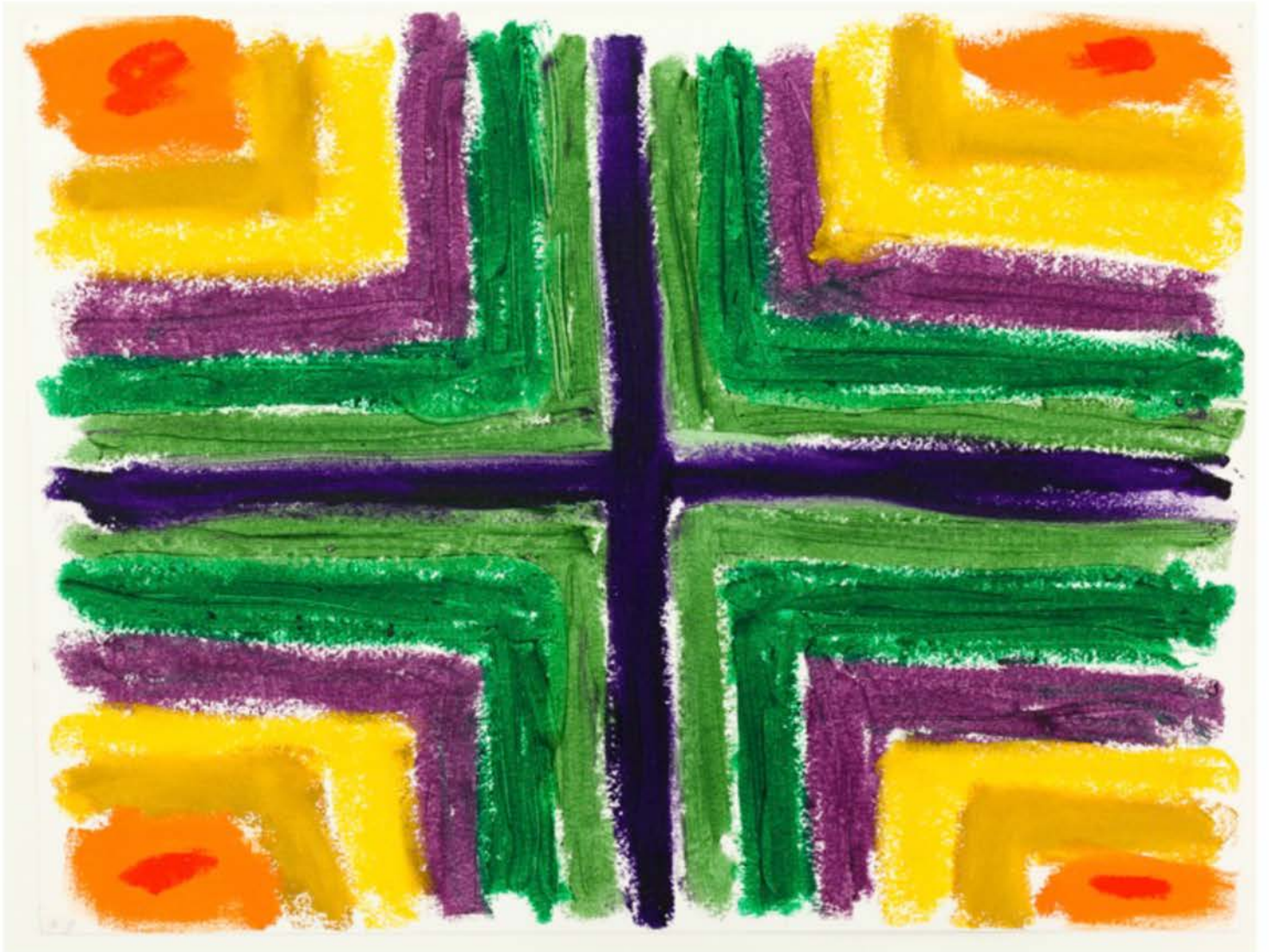
Installation view: South and East walls



*Untitled, 2015*  
Oilstick on paper  
12 x 16 in.



*Untitled*, 2017  
Oil on canvas  
40 x 52 in.



*Untitled*, 2015  
Oilstick on paper  
12 x 16 in.



*Untitled, 2018*  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 40 in.

# Harriet Korman: *Permeable/Resistant*

by Raphael Rubinstein

THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY | NOVEMBER 1 – DECEMBER 21, 2018

When asked how she starts one of her recent quadrant-based paintings, Harriet Korman replies that her first step is to “find the center.” She does so without the assistance of any measuring device, relying solely on her hand and eye to determine the point from which she will begin building out her right-angled bands of color. This doesn’t mean that the entire composition is improvised: each painting is closely based on a 12 by 16 inch oilstick drawing in which Korman has already worked out the number of bands and the sequence of their colors. Not all of the eleven paintings in this show were accompanied by a corresponding drawing, but in the four cases where the preliminary sketch was present, it was clear that the artist had carefully followed the drawing.



Ms. Harriet Korman, *Untitled*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 40 x 52 inches. Courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery.

And yet, the translation from oilstick on paper to oil on canvas results in a total transformation. Understanding exactly why the paintings are so different from the drawings may help us to grasp something crucial about Korman’s work. Obviously, the materials have a lot to do with this, as does the scale (the paintings range between 30 by 40 and 48 by 60 inches). We respond to the physicality of oil paint and canvas—its surface subtleties, its chromatic richness, its historical associations—differently than we do to a drawing. We also have different expectations regarding notions of labor and finish.

At first glance, Korman’s paintings look like they belong to the realm of strict modular abstraction in which every color unit has been precisely placed and formed. It only takes a few more seconds of viewing to see how deeply this isn’t the case. The geometry in Korman’s paintings never lines up exactly. What seems like perfect modularity turns out to be unabashed irregularity: edges waver,

## Raphael Rubinstein

Raphael Rubinstein is the author of *The Miraculous* (Paper Monument, 2014) and *A Geniza* (Granary Books, 2015). He is currently writing a book about the Jewish-Egyptian writer Edmond Jabès. A Professor of Critical Studies at the University of Houston School of Art, he divides his time between Houston and New York.

bands taper and swell, shapes that by the logic of the composition should be of equal size are found not to be so. The geometry of these paintings is emphatically handmade, and the longer you look at them, the more handmade they reveal themselves to be. The painting history she belongs to runs from Paul Klee to Mary Heilmann, rather than from Anni Albers to early Frank Stella. There's also a strong connection to the realm of textiles. Korman's concentric geometry can recall the "Housetop" quilts of Gee's Bend (like Martha Jane Pettway's "Housetop"— nine-block "Half-Log Cabin" Variation corduroy quilt from circa 1945 in the Souls Grown Deep collection) as well as weavings by Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Albers.



Ms. Harriet Korman, *Untitled*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 40 x 52 inches. Courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery.

When she sticks to the same colors for the bands in all four corners of a painting, the effect is very different from the canvases where each quadrant features a different sequence of colors. In the latter case, the cruciform symmetry breaks apart dramatically. A single canvas begins to look like a cropped view of the abutting corners of four different paintings and it becomes difficult to resolve the composition into a single image. In one painting Korman breaks the symmetry still further by introducing a diagonal color division into the upper left quadrant.

Writing in *Artforum* in 1975, Roberta Smith observed that Korman's "second show is good, one of this year's best in its own modest, youthful way. Korman's paintings are very simple. What's amazing about them is not that she does so much with so little but that she does much with so little with such nonchalance. And the nonchalance isn't a negative quality, because the results aren't sloppy or insubstantial." The austerity Smith noted ("so much with so little") vanished from Korman's work long ago, but the nonchalance is still evident.

The implications of artistic nonchalance are worth teasing out. Although usually contrasted with highly finished, rigidly executed work, the particular kind of casual approach Korman employs really has nothing to do with degrees of finish. Rather, her willingness to let the painting find its own equilibrium is an expression of a philosophy that posits an underlying natural order, a universal harmony. It's the same thing you see in African figurative sculptures that embrace asymmetry and accept irregularities in the wood, and the same thing that Lao Tzu expressed in the *Tao Te Ching* when he wrote (as John C.H. Wu's translation has it), "He who fusses over anything ruins it" and "The greatest straightness looks like crookedness."

You can only make paintings like Korman's if you have faith that you can channel visual verities greater than your own individual style. It's also generally true that you can only make paintings like this if you've been at it for a long time. I don't know if Korman will continue with this quadrant format (I, for one, certainly hope so), but the approach seems so full of potential that the paintings in this show, fantastic as they are, feel like just the beginning.



# HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

## Harriet Korman's Formal Mastery

Being a torch carrier wasn't Korman's thing.



John Yau

November 18, 2018

162 Shares



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2015), oil on canvas, 30 × 40 inches (all images courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery)

Harriet Korman began exhibiting her abstract paintings in 1971, during Conceptual Art's ascendancy and when many in the art establishment considered painting to be a casualty of history's progress.

Working in the wake of Minimalism, Color Field painting, shaped paintings, and painting-as-object, Korman rejected the argument Donald Judd put

forth[in]his influential essay, "Specific Objects" (1965): "The main thing wrong with painting is that it is a rectangular plane placed flat against the wall. A rectangle is a shape itself; it is obviously the whole shape; it determines and limits the arrangement of whatever is on or inside of it." Instead of seeing this as a limitation, Korman embraced painting's legacy as a challenge.

At the same time, over the course of a career that has spanned nearly 50 years, Korman has never developed a signature style, motif, or process; she has never become part of a movement or been associated with a particular

group. Nor has she looked back — like some in her generation — and become a revivalist of early American Modernism, aligning herself with such artists as Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, or Albert Pinkham Ryder. Being a torch carrier wasn't her thing.



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2016), oil on canvas, 48 × 60 inches

What can be said with certainty is that Korman has periodically contemplated such formal issues as the division of a painting's

surface, while the art world has shifted its attention to an emphasis on content. And yet, even if formalism has been a recurring feature of Korman's work, no single group of paintings typifies it. Where Judd saw limitations, Korman finds freedom. The fact that she has found this freedom without developing a signature style or abandoning painting and the rectangle is a rather remarkable achievement that has never received the attention it warrants.

While the death of painting — as a model of looking at and thinking about art — has been refuted, those who propagated it have never really reexamined their original position, preferring either to ignore painting or act as if the construction of their canon needs only some minor tinkering — a bit more inclusivity here, a few cosmetic touches there. These are some of the reasons why Korman has never gotten what she has long deserved: a comprehensive overview of her paintings and drawings initiated by a mainstream

institution.



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2015), oil on canvas, 30 × 40 inches

So this is a call out to those who profess to care about art and perhaps can do something to change what I believe is a gross injustice: Go see the exhibition, *Harriet Korman, Permeable/Resistant: Recent Paintings and Drawings*, at Thomas Erben Gallery (November 1–December 21, 2018).

The exhibition consists of 11 oil paintings and four oilstick drawings, all of which share the same format — a centrally placed cross of colored lines that divides the painting's rectangular surface into four sets of L-shaped bands and solidly colored rectangles locked into the composition's four corners.

The four drawings are dated 2015, while the 11 paintings are dated between 2015 and

2018. All the works are untitled. While the drawings were all done on sheets measuring 12 by 16 inches, the paintings come in three different sizes: 30 by 40 inches, 40 by 52 inches, and 48 by 60 inches. Korman selects a specific drawing to establish the color pattern of a painting and the width of its bands, but the change in the medium, size, and ratio of height to width results in very different works. In this regard, the drawings are not blueprints for the paintings.



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2015), oilstick on paper, 12 × 16 inches

Drawing is central to Korman's work. For years she has adhered to two simple rules: she does not use a ruler or other mechanical aid to make her lines, and the color is never mixed, coming from either the tube or in stick form.

What strikes me about the simple division (a cross dividing the horizontal

rectangle into four equal sections) she establishes in these drawings is how much she does with it. Her approach can be read as a refutation of the mechanical side of the Minimalism (the use of masking tape, hard edges, and the cool, uninflected application of paint to signal the removal of the hand). Many artists used these devices to push their works towards the purely optical.

Korman, on the other hand, pushes toward the optical without resorting to the mechanical or removing all signs of the hand. She wants the making of the work to be visible, but without emphasizing the hand, as many of the gestural Abstract Expressionists did. Her use of compositional divisions to structure the color can be seen as a rejection of certain aspects of Color Field painting. For Korman, control and improvisation are two sides of the same coin. In these works, she updates Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square* series, reminding us that there is no such thing as the last word or the last

painting, at least while civilization continues to exist.

The challenge presented by the simple division of a larger rectangle into four smaller rectangles, whose individual shapes echo the overall shape, is what Korman focuses on in these drawings and the paintings that came after them. What could easily become mechanical and repetitive never does. This is one of the delights of the exhibition. The parameters she uses to launch the drawings never become formulaic.



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2016), oil on canvas, 40 x 52 inches.

In one drawing, she uses purple vertical and horizontal lines to make the central cross, which she flanks with substantially wider orange bands, which are in turn edged in dark blue. There is a tension between the blue-edged, orange cross and the four

orange cross and the four small rectangles it tucks into the drawing's four corners, each bordered by multiple, differently colored L-shaped bands. Against the dark blue edging and purple cross, the orange advances, pulling the edging and cross with it and becoming a form that is distinct.

Conversely, the rectangles tucked into the four corners become focal points pulling our attention away from the cross-like form dividing the sheet into quadrants.

Looking becomes an act of reconfiguring, of shifting between figure and ground.

Korman further complicates this tension by doing something unexpected, changing the order of the colored bands embracing the four corners. A rectangle in one corner might be a different color than the other three. She might place closely related hues adjacent to each other, and edge them with contrasting colors.

There is a musical current flowing through these paintings; they convey a mesmerizing, staccato pulse. While certain colors

reappear — deep blue and royal purple, for example — Korman seems to have no particular palette that she relies on. Between 2015, when she started this group, and 2018, when she completed it, the palette grows richer and more cacophonous. Korman has become ever more masterful in her structuring of color. It is time we honor that achievement.

Harriet Korman,  
Permeable/Resistant: Recent  
Paintings and Drawings  
*continues at Thomas Erben*  
*Gallery (526 West 26th*  
*Street, 4th floor, Chelsea,*  
*Manhattan) through*  
*December 21.*

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