

Thomas Erben Gallery



Harriet Korman

Notes on Painting 1969 – 2019

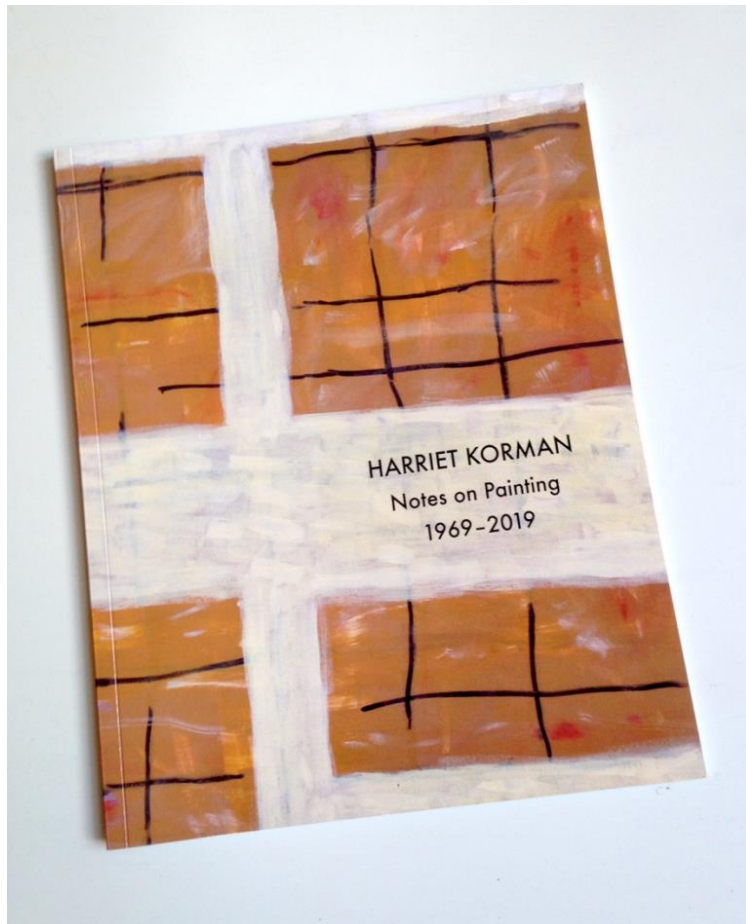
On view at the gallery: October 23 – December 19, 2020



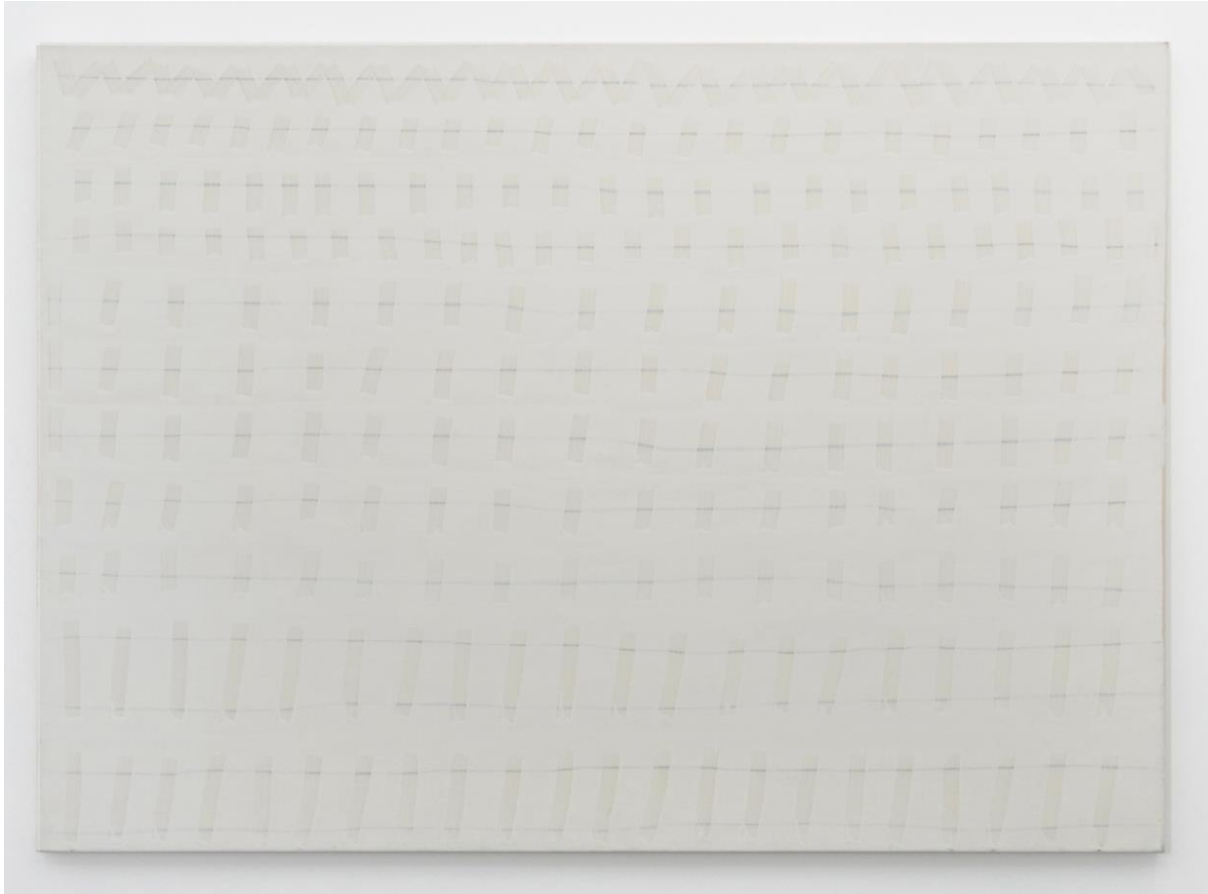
We are very excited to announce *Notes on Painting: 1969 -2019*, **Harriet Korman's** second show with the gallery, which will feature some of her seminal paintings from the early '70s and trace her development until 2019 (an exhibition of her most recent work will then follow in fall of 2021).

At the very onset of her career, Korman's work was widely noticed which led to exhibitions with Galerie Rolf Ricke (Cologne), 112 Greene Street (New York), Daniel Weinberg (San Francisco), and Galerie m in Bochum (with Frank Stella). Her paintings were also included in the 1972 Whitney Annual, as well as the 1973 and 1995 Whitney Biennials and were part of *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967-1975* in 2007. Critical praise, as well as a devoted following amidst her peers, have always accompanied her development.

A press preview will take place on Thursday, October 22, from 2 - 6pm, preceding the show's accessibility to the public from October 23 - December 19 (Tue - Sat, 10 - 6pm). On Saturday, November 14, the artist will be present at the gallery from 1 - 6pm to welcome friends and members of the public.



Korman published an illustrated catalogue with personal statements to accompany the exhibition, which was previewed by John Yau on [HYPERALLERGIC](#), May 23, 2020. You can see the full article further below. The catalogue can be acquired at or ordered from the gallery (\$ 25 postage paid).



Untitled, 1973. Acrylic gesso and crayon on canvas, 60 x 84 in.

Korman's "scrape paintings" which she began in 1969 – large canvases traversed with crayon lines, covered with gesso and then scraped through with a piece of wood or trowel to reveal some of the lines underneath – led Roberta Smith to rate her 1975 Greene Street Gallery show "as one of this year's best in its own, modest, youthful way" (Artforum, Sept. '75). She particularly noted the artist's confident touch and nonchalance, qualities that are consistent throughout her work.



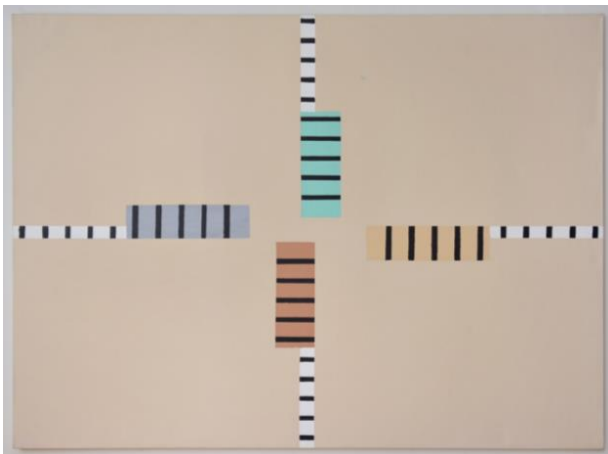
Untitled, 1971. Acrylic gesso and crayon on paper, 26 3/4 x 20 11/16 in (framed).



Untitled, 1971. Acrylic gesso and crayon on paper, 26 3/4 x 20 11/16 in (framed).



Installation view, South wall



Also, during the early '70s, Korman produced taped, hard-edge paintings on unprimed canvas – sort of facsimiles of the gesso process paintings. She even built structures out of wooden bars, drawing her brush across them, the result replicating the scrape off paintings in reverse.

Untitled, 1971. Acrylic on unprimed canvas, 72 x 84 in.



Untitled, 1978. Oil on canvas, 28 x 36 in.

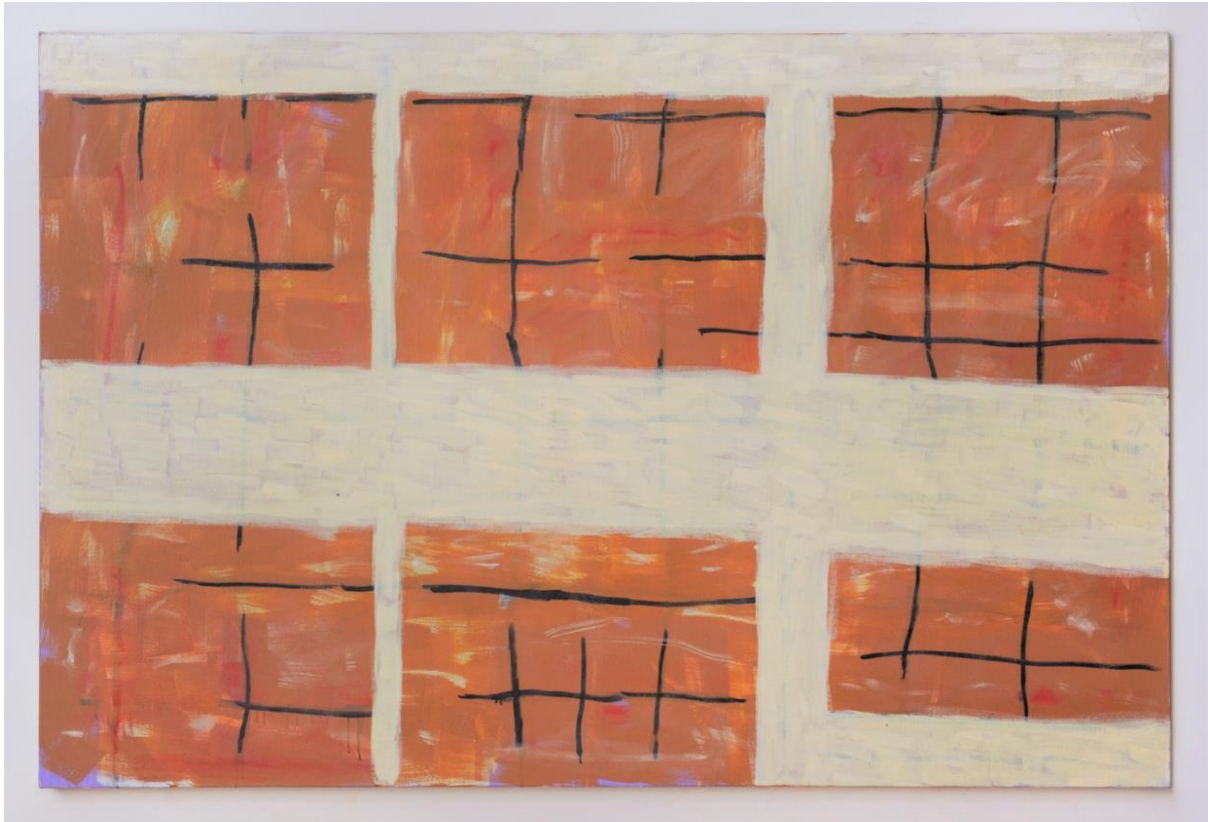
In 1977, finding the systematic nature of the process limiting, she switched to oils for more flexibility, change, and exploration. She felt that "what happens while you paint is more interesting than what you think before you paint"¹. As she continued, her work developed into distinct groups every few years.



Installation view, West wall



Untitled, 1977. Oil on canvas, 84 x 60 in.



Untitled, 1991. Oil on canvas, 48 x 72 in.



Untitled, 1983. Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in.



Installation view, North wall



Untitled, 1996. Oil on canvas, 72 x 72 in.



Untitled, 1996. Oil on linen, 78 x 78 in.



Untitled, 1997. Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in.

A pivotal moment occurred in 1996 after completing a black and white series. Her color seemed to offer less contrast by comparison, and she decided to paint without adding any white. This also reinforced her interest in painting without any recognizable elements, light, or space aiming for "the paintings to be an example of things as they are"². Even with that limitation, the subsequent multiple series have developed with great variation - organic shapes and gestures, geometric configurations and structures - sustaining her ever since.



Installation view, East wall

This first survey of Korman's work will allow an insight into a lifelong project about which Raphael Rubinstein remarked "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 have been at it for a long time"³.

¹Korman, Harriet. *3 Drawings from 1971, information for a group exhibition in 2018*, Notes on Painting, 1969-2019, unpaginated, 2020.

²Korman, Harriet. *Grant application, Career Narrative, 2013*, Notes on Painting, 1969-2019, unpaginated, 2020.

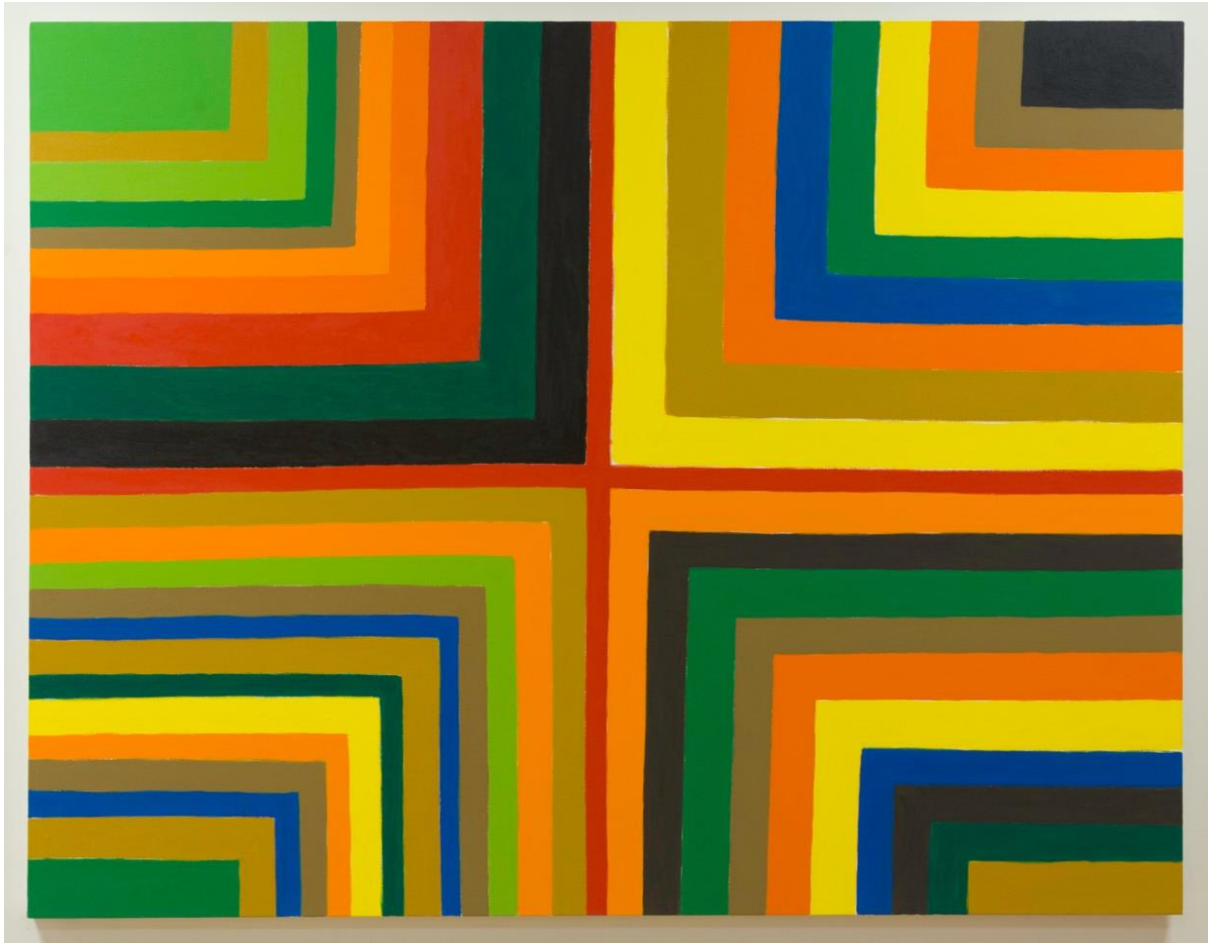
³Rubinstein, Raphael. *Harriet Korman: Permeable/Resistant*, Brooklyn Rail, *Art Seen*, Dec. 11, 2018.



Untitled, 1999. Oil on canvas, 54 x 54 in.



Untitled, 2001. Oil on canvas, 60 x 60 in.



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

The New York Times

Dec. 9, 2020

5 Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now

Thornton Dial's "Flying Tiger," Thomas Eggerer's protest painting, Harriet Korman's brilliant canvases, Sheida Soleimani's portraits of Iranian-U.S. relations, and Etel Adnan's tapestries.

Harriet Korman

Through Dec. 19. Thomas Erben Gallery, 526 West 26th Street, Manhattan. (212) 645-8701; thomaserben.com



Harriet Korman, "Untitled," from 2001, oil on canvas. Harriet Korman and Thomas Erben Gallery

Those who dedicate their lives to making art usually have early, middle and late phases. This show, modestly subtitled "Notes on Painting, 1969-2019," follows Harriet Korman through hers with a dozen canvases accounting for 50 years of forward motion that has not been without struggle.

The works start with Ms. Korman's brilliant, daringly casual Process Art paintings from the late 1960s and early '70s. Covering parallel lines of blue crayon with white acrylic that she partly scraped off, she created loosely gridded tattersall patterns of line, paint and bare canvas that built on the radical ideas of older painters like Frank Stella and Robert Ryman, and made Ms. Korman briefly something of a young art star.

Then starting in the late '70s and through the mid '90s, she regrouped, shifting to oil paint, trying to build on her distinctively casual approach to geometry. Around the turn of this century, she settled into a seemingly conservative geometry of brightly colored shapes and stripes that she gradually made strange and new. Unrelieved by white or any figure-ground push-pull, Ms. Korman's colors are saturated, even slightly dark and structured into intuitive compositions; they press forward with an unusual emotional and optical intensity.

In an untitled painting from 2001, a field of mostly irregular triangles jostle one another for prominence. In a 2016 painting, also untitled, concentric right angles of many colors push in from the corners, forming a quasi-cross or four asymmetrical chevrons. It would be inspiring to see Ms. Korman's 50 years of art-making filled out with more examples of her journey. What is here conveys refreshingly different ideas about originality, discipline and self-awareness. Life is short, art is long. Painting, at least measured by the time often required to develop, may be the longest of all.

ROBERTA SMITH

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

One of New York's Purest Abstract Painters

Harriet Korman has never wanted to become part of someone else's story.



John Yau May 23, 2020



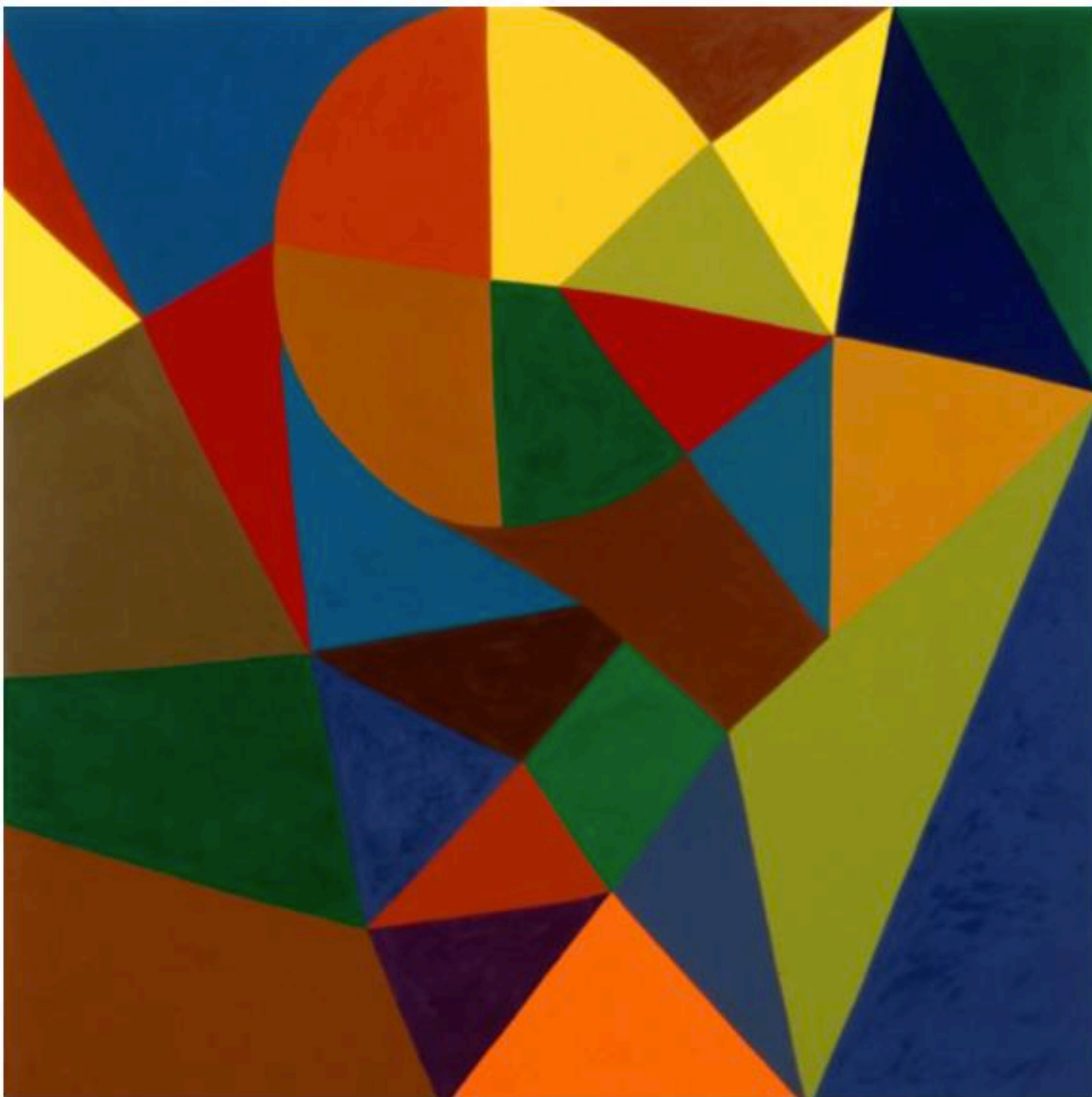
Harriet Korman, "Focus" (2011), oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches (image courtesy the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, photo by Kevin Noble)

Harriet Korman's career is a benchmark for abstract painting, particularly as it has unfolded in New York between 1972, when her work was included in the Whitney Annual, and the present.

In striking contrast to many of her peers, Korman has never developed a signature style, nor has she ever introduced imagery into her work. There is no light, shadow,

illusionism, or space in her paintings. They are human scaled (none are larger than nine feet, as far as I know), completely flat, and chromatically vibrant. Despite all the restraints that Korman adheres to — or, more accurately, options she has not taken — her paintings are always vivid and unpredictable.

Every mark and color Korman applies reinforces the fact that a painting is a two-dimensional surface. By stripping down the paintings to the irreducible elements of line and color, but never settling for a fashionable format, such as a grid, to deliver them, she attains a singular position as one of New York's purest abstract painters without a brand.



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2001), oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches (courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, photo by Harriet Korman)

Along with eschewing the grid and other pre-established abstract formats, Korman also rejected the legacy of biomorphism, as well as hard-edged shapes, monochrome, and overdrawing, all without becoming a Minimalist or Color Field painter. As a reductive artist working without an agenda or signature style, she has defined a position in the dialogue about abstract painting that is unmistakably hers, while work by many artists that was once fashionable seems increasingly dated.

What is striking about Korman's reductiveness is how restless she has been throughout her long and distinguished career, all while steadfastly working on rectangles. For the artist, the rectangular format of a painting is not a problem (as it was to Donald Judd, for example), but rather a challenging possibility, which is perhaps why she has never worked on a shaped canvas.

As she operates in this pared-down way Korman keeps reinventing the basic building blocks of a painting, which I see as the application of line and color on a flat surface. This is her unrivaled achievement, and it delivers a bracing challenge to other artists of her generation. Refusing embellishment and personal flourishes, she does something that is seemingly impossible: within the spartan means she devises for herself in each group of paintings, she is simultaneously rigorous and loose; color, line, structure, and improvisation meld seamlessly together in unexpected ways.

These are the enduring traits of Korman's greatness, which the art world has never fully addressed, preferring signature styles and fashionable superfluities. Living and working in an age when style and content are held in higher regard than substance, she has defined and explored a solitary path in which citation, parody, the readymade, irony, and subject matter have no place. Having cleared so much out of her work, what is it that the viewer encounters when standing in front of one of her paintings? This is the question I want to address because I believe it is crucial to recognizing the nature of Korman's accomplishment.

Recently, in the self-published catalogue *Harriet Korman: Notes on Painting 1969–2019*, which the artist sent me, I came across two statements that I want to cite. In her text “2005, On Painting,” Korman stated:

What is my relationship to the surface? Covering, uncovering, changing, marking — in many ways treating the surface as a two-dimensional plane, another aspect of reality, as a sculptor would.

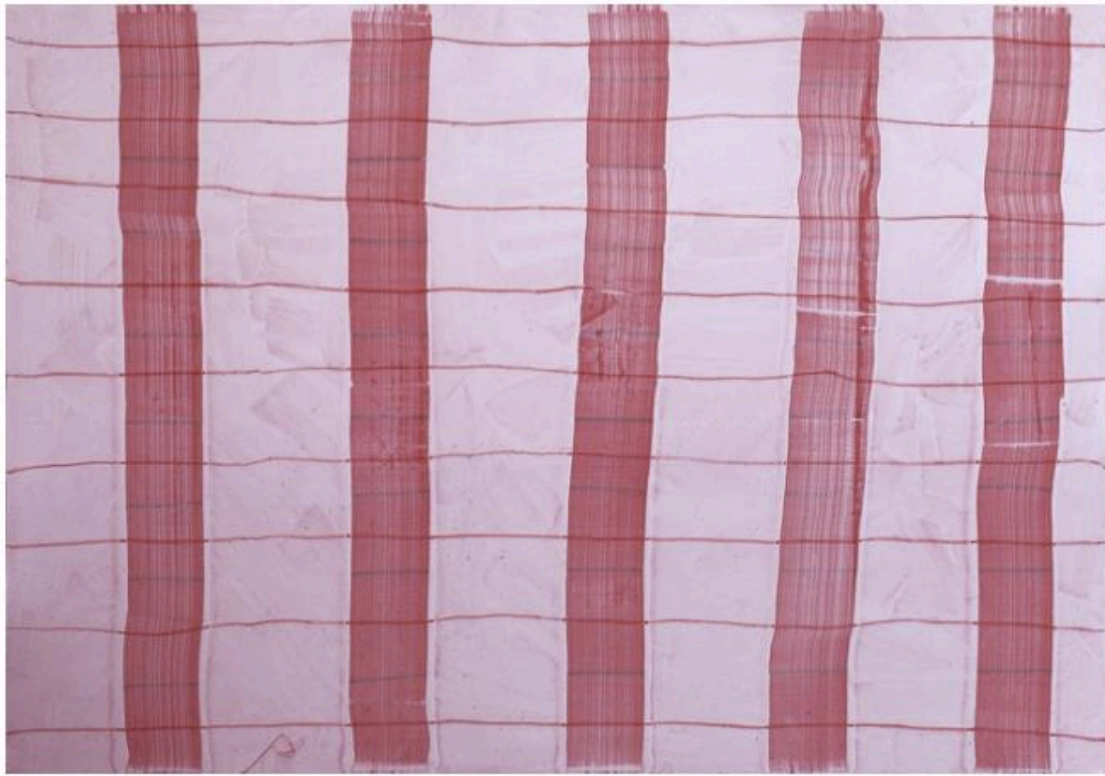
In a later note, “3 Drawings from 1971, information for a group exhibition in 2018,” on work done at the outset of her career, Korman wrote:

The painting process I became involved with was traversing the surface (drawing) side to side/edge to edge with a crayon, then covering the surface with acrylic gesso, then scraping off some of the gesso in bands with a piece of wood or trowel.

After looking through the catalogue and reading these statements, I emailed Korman and asked her if she thought what she called “process” was related to drawing. She wrote back:

Yes, the two statements are related, and could be described as relating to drawing. I am a very process-oriented painter; I get a lot out of what happens when you paint. This has a relationship to drawing in that there is a flexibility involved. I mostly started drawing with color in 2010.

Korman’s catalogue was published for a survey exhibition at her gallery, Thomas Erben, which was scheduled to open in April, but has now been delayed to the fall. It is a show that I have wanted to happen, at least since I proposed that a museum ought to give Korman’s work a long and deep look in my [review](#) of her exhibition *Harriet Korman: Line or Edge, Line or Color, New Paintings and Drawings* at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc. (September 18–November 1, 2014). A survey exhibition spanning 50 years will introduce her work to viewers who don’t know it, as well as remind her fans — of which I am one — just how exceptional her paintings and drawings are.



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (1969), acrylic, gesso, and crayon on dyed canvas, 60 x 84 inches (courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, photo by Harriet Korman)

Drawing — the most fundamental process — is at the root of Korman’s practice. Although she has not shown them often, those I have seen have dazzled me. The color relationships are always unpredictable, while the mark-making is direct, flatfooted, and even clunky at times. They are eloquently terse, like the 16 words of William Carlos Williams’s poem “The Red Wheelbarrow.”

I never feel like Korman is trying to finesse something; that directness is carried over into her painting. Since she began painting in color, she has made works in which the majority of the interlocking shapes have curved edges. She has also incorporated a diamond motif and has divided the painting’s rectangle into four equal-sized rectangles, each of which is further divided into six triangles. Each of these 24 triangles, nested within four rectangles, is defined by one color. This could become a pattern or design, but Korman never takes that route; instead, she works from one form to another.

“Focus” (oil on canvas, 48 by 60 inches, 2011) has no underlying plan to hold it together, to unify it. We see two adjacent triangles in different shades of blue, one larger than the other.

Using paint straight out of the tube, she explores shifts in color and hue. In addition to multiple red, blues, yellows, and greens, she applies various browns and mauves. Each connection we form between two or three or even four shapes will shift so there is neither a focal point nor an all-over pattern or repetition. (This is why I don't see a connection to the Gee's Bend quilt that Raphael Rubinstein made in his review of Korman in *The Brooklyn Rail*.) Rather, Korman keeps the viewer's attention shifting, which is the real and deep pleasure of the painting: it continually reveals links and differences.



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2016), oil on canvas, 40 x 52 inches (courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, photo by Dylan Obser)

In the exhibition Harriet Korman, Permeable/Resistant: Recent Paintings and Drawings at Thomas Erben Gallery (November 1–December 21, 2018), which I reviewed, Korman drew a centrally placed cruciform, without using a ruler or tape to determine its placement or precision.

The cross divides the painting's rectangular surface into four sets of L-shaped bands and solid-colored rectangles locked into the composition's four corners. The tension

between completeness (the crosses) and incompleteness (the rectangles tucked in the corners) causes us to see differences. At a certain point does the cross shift into four L shapes? The rectangles in the corners are not all the same size or the same color. Again, we cannot determine any underlying pattern, as the color choices seem to follow no obvious order. Structure, improvisation, and surprise are inextricable from each other.

In these cruciform paintings, Korman has come up with a structured color composition that holds its own with Ad Reinhardt's non-relational compositions in black and red. She both loosened and reimagined Reinhardt's brilliant rigidity by drawing in color. By making vibrant color compositions that address Reinhardt's black paintings, which he claimed were "the last paintings one can make," Korman challenges that endgame mentality and the various narratives that incorporate it. This is one area that makes apparent the greatness of Korman's achievement.

Korman does not focus on painting's purpose, but on process, which is connected to drawing. She has never wanted to become part of someone else's story.

ARTS REVIEW

At the Galleries

by Karen Wilkin

Arts Review from the
Winter 2021 issue.



Farther uptown and farther west, Chelsea galleries came back to life with (relatively) heavily attended shows, despite requirements for appointments and other restrictions. Among the most satisfying of the fall offerings was “[Harriet Korman: Notes on Painting 1969–2019](#),” a mini-retrospective at Thomas Erben Gallery. The selection, made by the artist, followed her evolution over the past half century. Since each work represented an entire family of related paintings, the narrative was, of necessity, discontinuous; the initial impression was of variety: pale, cerebral canvases; disjointed grids; overscaled patchworks of saturated hues; stripes; stutters; and defiant compositions unlike any of the above. “If you want to understand painting,” Korman says in a [video](#) on the gallery website, “you have to try a lot of things.” But, she adds, there is a common thread, if you look for it. At its simplest level, that thread was Korman’s constant acknowledgement of the canvas as a flat, confrontational expanse that could be brought to life in many different ways. She sometimes deduced structure from the givens of the support, in works divided into quadrants, such as a 2016 example, with each quadrant generating a nest of concentric bands, no two alike, or works from 1971 diagramming the dimensions of the support with overlays, scraping, or tidy rows of stripes. In a vertical canvas from 1977, nested bands, reaching top to bottom, kicked out in the middle, broadening until the distinction between figure and ground became irrelevant.



Grids were implicit in many works, disrupted or knocked out of whack, as in the “background” of a 1983 painting where slapdash red and green crosshatches surrounded a tilted, roughly brushed, fat band of off-black, crossing a vertical column whose many hues were cancelled by loose purple scribbles. Black grids, confined to brown compartments forming an oversized grid, frayed into disconnected lines in a 1991 painting. And more. Korman seemed determined to assert the fact of the canvas, freely or loosely, by reminding us of its verticality and horizontality, and refusing to violate its flatness with illusionism, no matter how energetically her colors responded to each other. It was also clear that Korman dislikes repeating herself, no matter how fruitful a given approach may have been. “When people say there’s no more that can be done in painting,” Korman says, “that’s when the fun begins.” Her fun has dramatically serious results.

