



Drawings in the artist's studio

# Harriet Korman

*New Work*

February 24 - April 9, 2022



Installation view, west and north walls.

Thomas Erben Gallery is pleased to announce **Harriet Korman's** fourth showing with the gallery, which includes a solo presentation of her work at the 2021 edition of Art Basel Miami Beach. These new paintings and drawings are the latest result of a practice spanning more than 50 years. In Korman's words:

In this current series, I drew to find a form I wanted to work with. These drawings are not studies, I consider drawing to be an equal practice to painting and value them as such. While drawing, I chose a very simple, familiar form of concentric rectangles because it seemed like it would be an interesting challenge. I took that form into painting without referring to the drawings, and later used the drawings as sources for the paintings.

This form provides a framework against which Korman mobilizes her choice of color, the material qualities of paint itself, and the precise nonchalance of her brushwork.



*Untitled*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in.

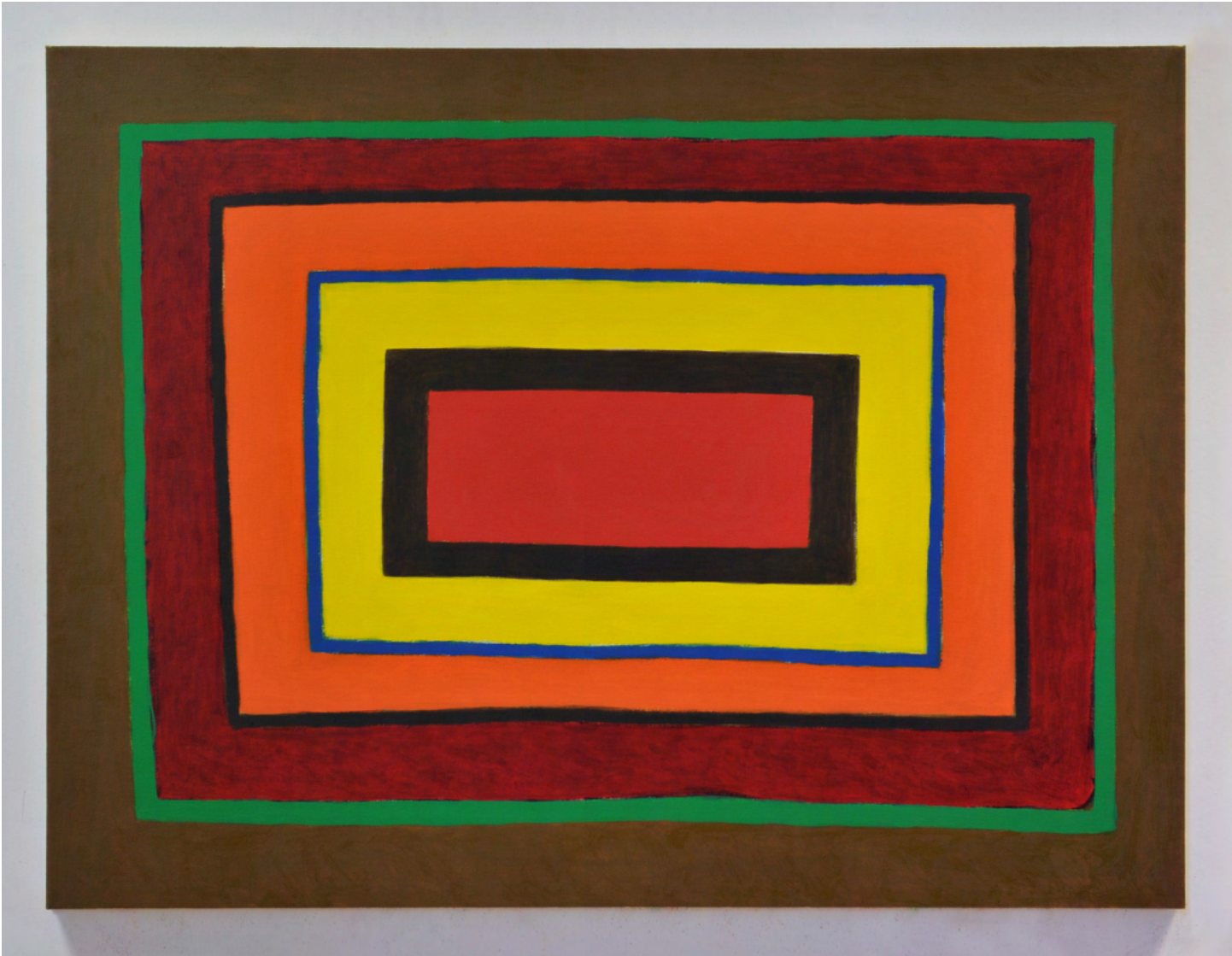


*Untitled*, 2019. Oil stick on paper, 12 x 16 in.

I try to capture the dynamic in the drawings; the color relationships, the proportions, the movement - what attracts me in the drawing, not copy it. This interpolation has many obstacles, pitfalls, inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies, but ultimately is very engaging.



*Untitled*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in.



*Untitled*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in.

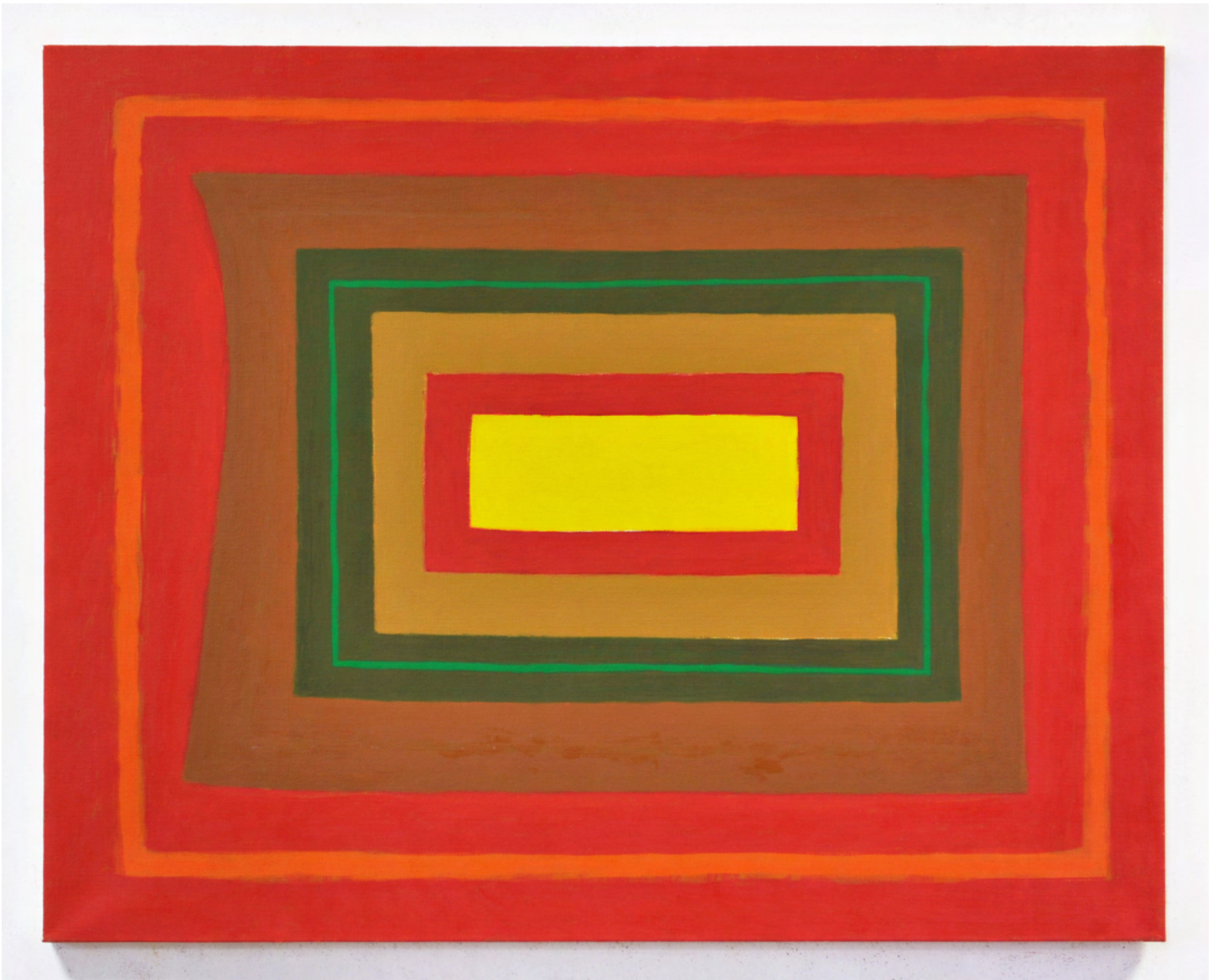


Installation view, west and north walls

The friction that results from this process is the source of the works' enigmatic allure, forming a space which only the eye (and the mind) can traverse. Form, for Korman, is more than just an aesthetic problem: it embodies the very substance of painting and the chimerical nature of art.

Cézanne once wrote, in a letter to Emile Bernard, that the "sole and unique aim" of his work as a painter was "the realization of that part of nature which, coming into our line of vision, gives the picture . . . the image of what we see." Far from a theory of art's subservience to nature, what Cézanne tries to articulate in this passage is a view of art arising from the same metaphysical substance as nature, partaking of the same vital essence.

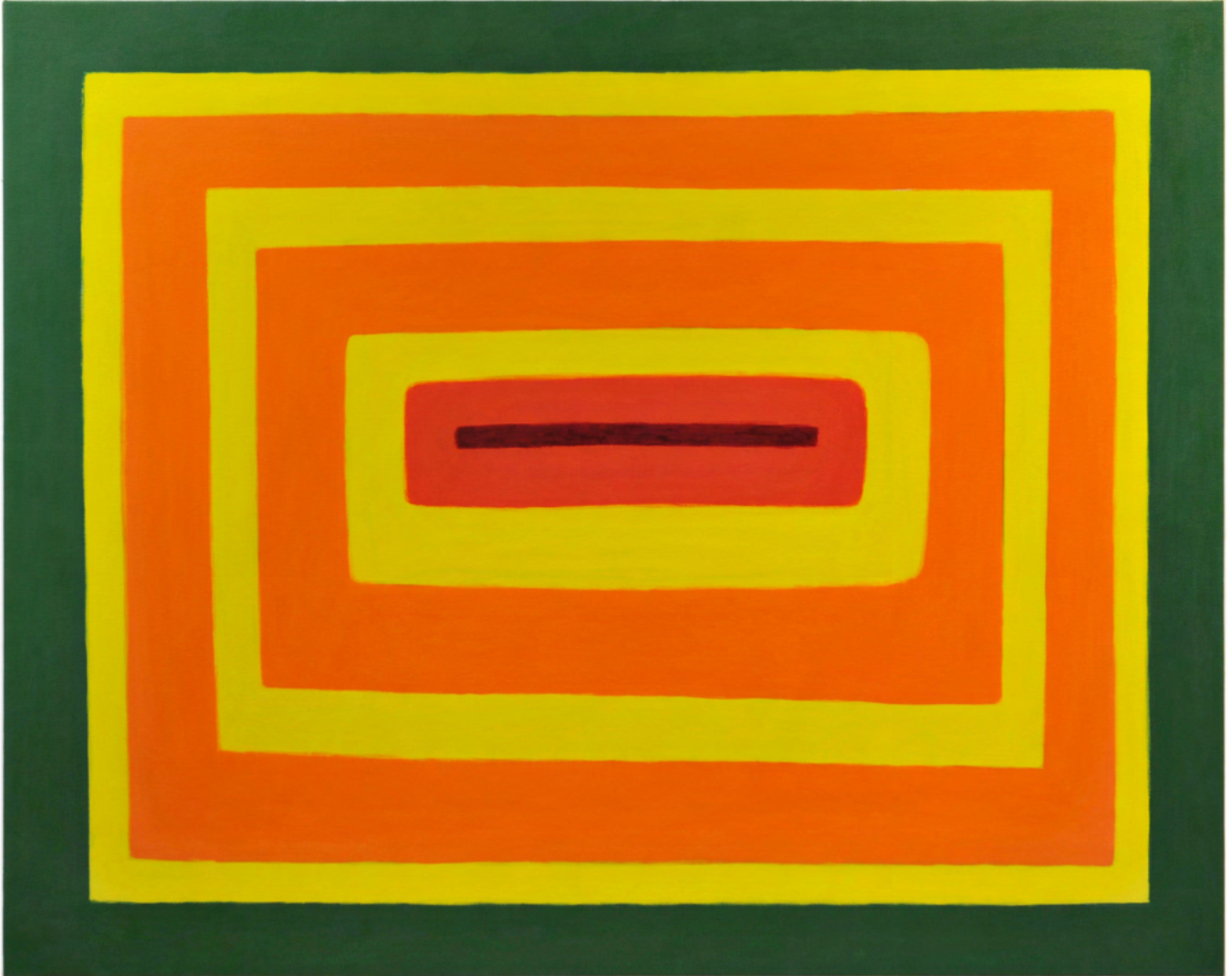
For Cézanne, the task of the painter is to discover the liminal point at which the material components of painting dissolve into a vision. Similarly for Korman, painting "represents everything . . . an abstract illusion . . . an illusion of . . . thought."



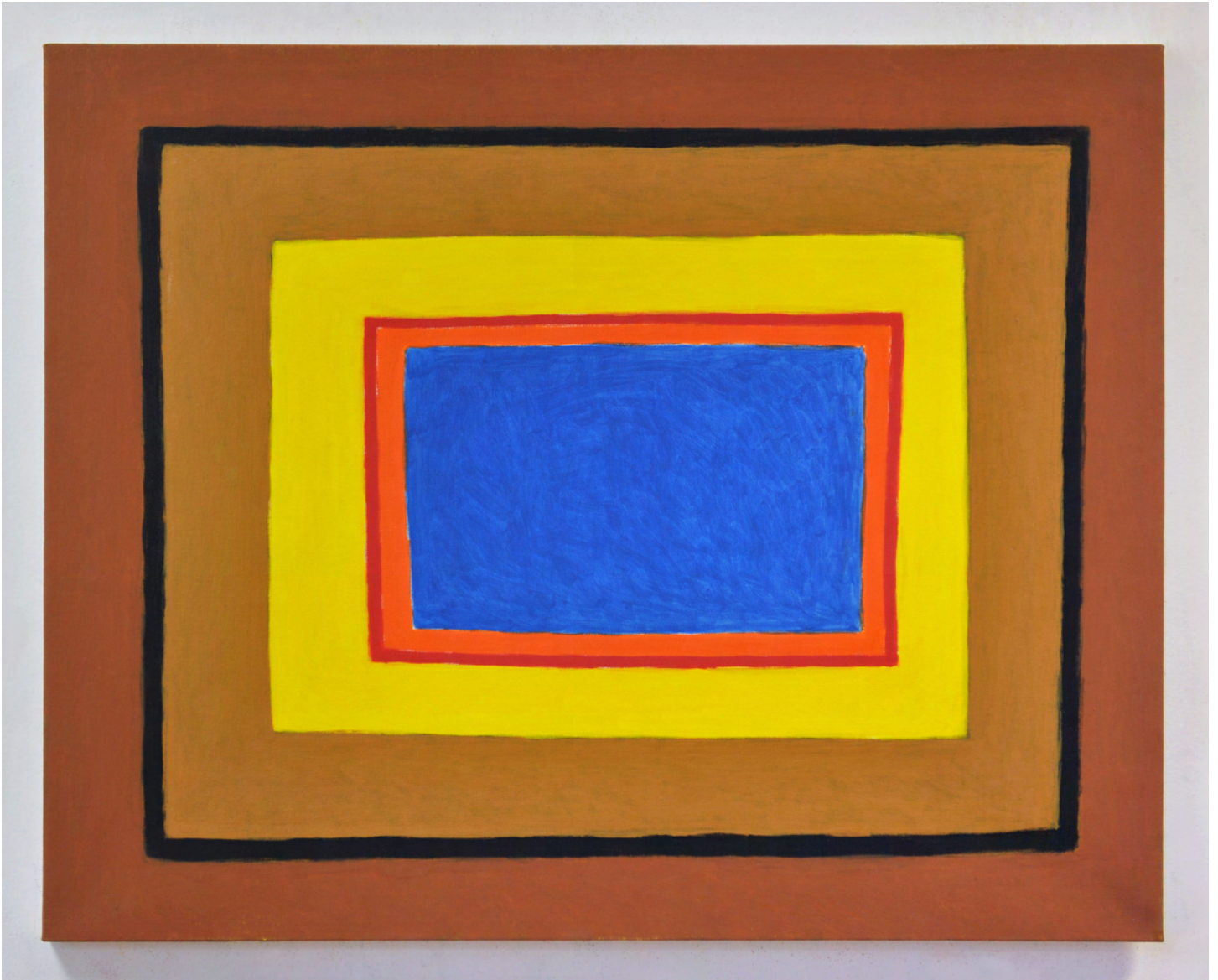
*Untitled, 2019. Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in.*

Confronted with the vibrant presence of Korman's paintings, one gets the feeling that her work, despite its warmth and sensitivity – despite its aestheticism – harbors a challenge to the viewer, suggesting a field of meaning beyond perception of the forms at hand. More than just exhibiting an extreme formal inquiry, Korman's paintings administer a spiritual *shock*.





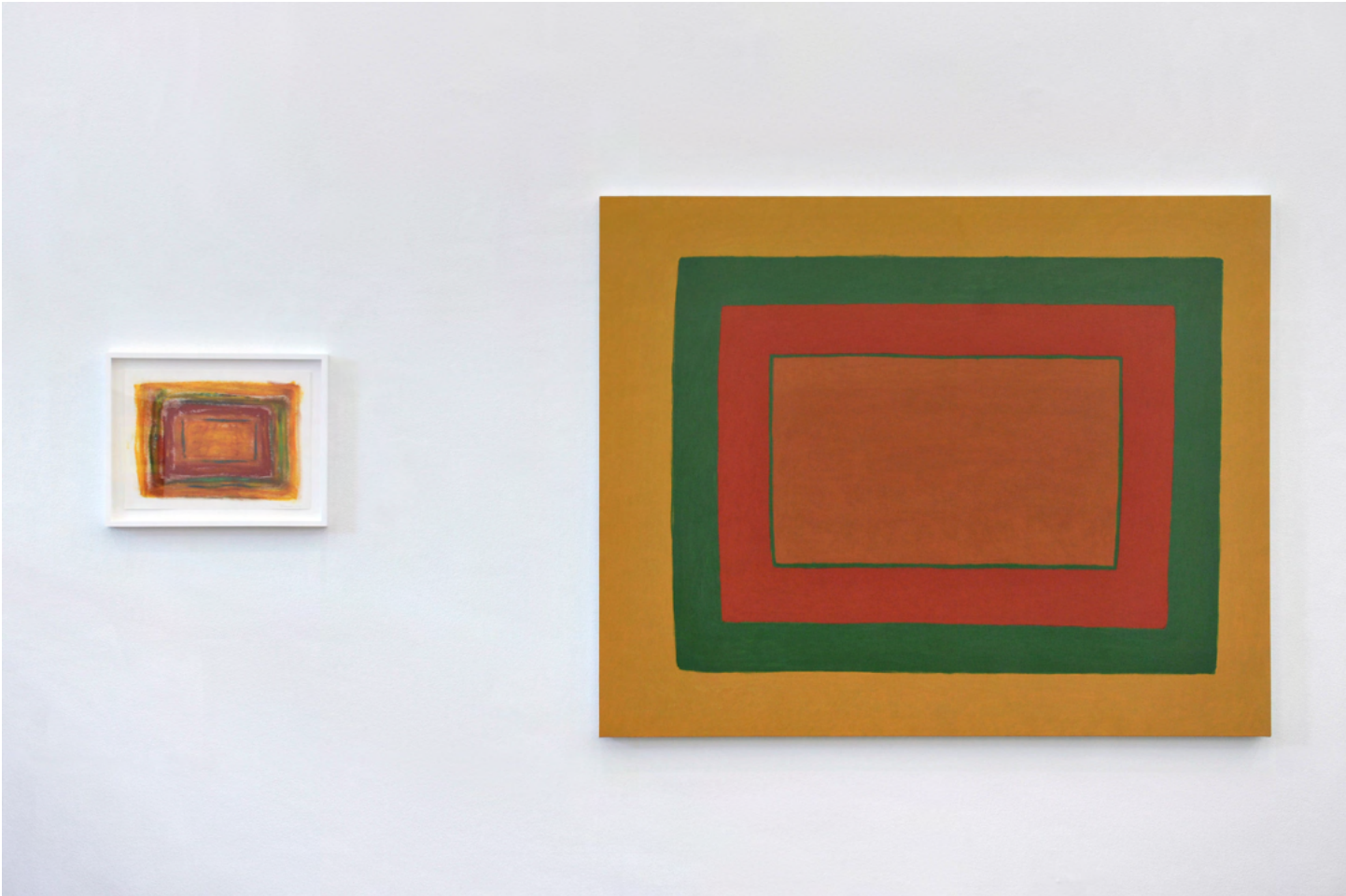
*Untitled*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in.



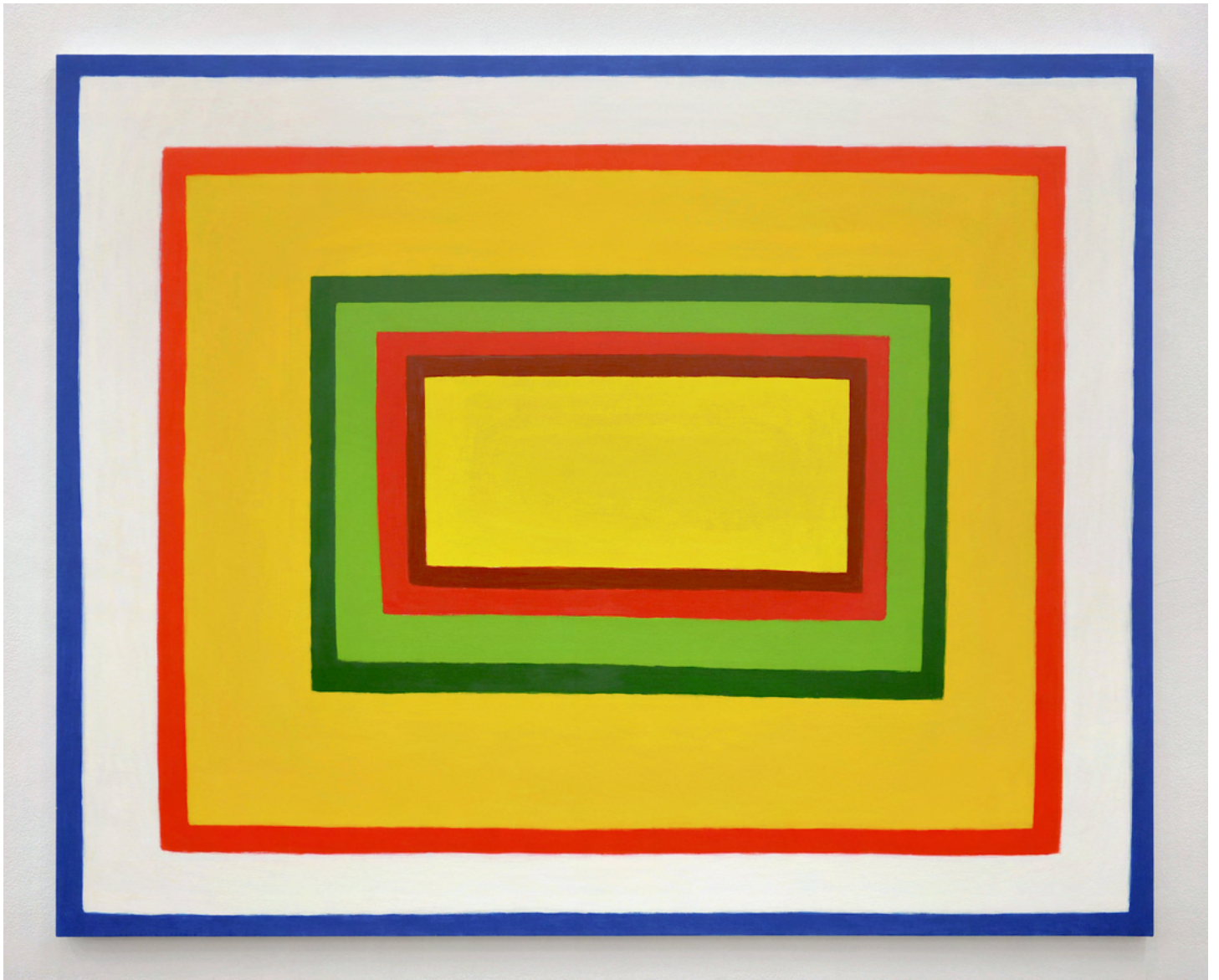
*Untitled*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in.



Installation view, east and south walls



Installation view, east wall



*Untitled*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in.



Installation view, east and south walls



*Untitled*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 40 x 52 in.



*Untitled*, 2019. Oil stick on paper, 12 x 16 in.





*Untitled*, 2019. Oil stick on paper, 12 x 16 in.

About the artist:

Thomas Erben Gallery has been working with **Harriet Korman** since 2018. Over the past few years, her work has received growing attention, garnering reviews from Roberta Smith for *The New York Times*, John Yau for *Hyperallergic*, and Raphael Rubinstein for *The Brooklyn Rail*, among many others.

This April, Korman will be included in a two-person show at **SITE131** in Dallas. Several of her paintings recently entered the **Kienzle Foundation** collection, and her work was included in the 30th anniversary exhibition at **Carlier Gebauer** this past November, curated by Dieter Schwarz (former director of the Kunstmuseum Winterthur). This interest builds on Korman's earlier exhibitions with Galerie **Rolf Ricke**, Cologne (1970, '71 and '72), **Galerie m**, Bochum (1977), and **Häusler Contemporary**, Munich (2015).

In the U.S., Korman has participated in the **Whitney Annual** (1972) and two **Whitney Biennials** (1973 and 1995), and was included in *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-75* as well as a three person show at **MoMa PS1** (both 2007). Throughout her career, her work has received substantial critical support. She has shown extensively with such galleries as **112 Greene Street**, **Daniel Weinberg Gallery**, **Willard Gallery**, and **Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.**

# The New York Times

## What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries Right Now

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, MARCH 25, 2022

**GALLERIES**



HARRIET KORMAN AND THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY

Harriet Korman's "Untitled" (2019), in her show "New Work" at Thomas Erben Gallery. Her work seems to stretch before your eyes.

**Harriet Korman**  
Through April 9. Thomas Erben, 526 West 26th Street, Manhattan; 212-645-8701, [thomaserben.com](http://thomaserben.com).

Harriet Korman's paintings have been good for a while. Now they're getting better. In "New Work," she continues her long-time practice of destabilizing geometry, making it a living, breathing, uneasy thing through asymmetry, personal touch and an unyielding palette. Especially important is her virtual banishment of white — which is so closely tied to geometric abstraction's supposed purity, from Malevich and Mondrian forward.

For most of the 2000s, Korman specialized in paintings that were seemingly fractured into varying triangles, interrupted by occasional curves and ovals. Around 2016, she went symmetrical, most impressively with a series of cruciform compositions defined by right-angled bands of slightly jarring colors radiating into the paintings' corners. They seemed to almost stretch before your eyes.

Now Korman has turned to

as a personal one. They insist on Covid as a social experience — a reminder that we are responsible to others and we're not enduring it alone.

JILLIAN STEINHAUER



**Mel Leipzig**  
Through April 2. Gallery Henoch, 555 West 25th Street, Manhattan; 917-305-0003, [galleryhenoch.com](http://galleryhenoch.com).

Born in Brooklyn in 1935, Mel Leipzig studied painting at Cooper Union and Yale, where his interest in realist portraiture was discouraged by such eminences as Josef Albers. But he stuck to his vision, and since 1970 he's been chronicling the lives and contexts of friends and neighbors in Trenton, N.J. — where he taught for 45 years — with precision, empathy and a volume of detail that would overwhelm a photograph.

That's not to say that he's literal-minded. Leipzig frequently distorts perspective to fit things in, or to emphasize the centrality of his subjects in their environments. He doesn't shrink from



Walid Raad's "Comrade leader, comrade leader, how nice to see you" (2022),

**The Project of Independence of Decolonization in South Africa Now on view**



CHELSEA

## Harriet Korman

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Now Korman has turned to concentric rectangles. These also radiate toward the edges, but concentricity bestows all sorts of associations — with picture frames, television logos, underground film and especially irreverent riffs on Josef Albers's "Homage to the Square" paintings. In contrast to the master's carefully calibrated proportions and colors, Korman's homages to rectangles jump in and out, thanks to abrupt changes of width and color. Their frequent caramels and khakis flirt with tastelessness while bonding with adjacent blues, reds, greens and yellows, usually not very pure. Korman's refusal of rulers also adds vitality. Made strictly by hand, the bands of color wobble and occasionally curve emphatically. These are delightful, elucidating paintings, with their own off-center ideas about beauty. Most of all, they are alive.

*ROBERTA SMITH*

# HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

## The Deeply Satisfying Pleasures of Harriet Korman's Paintings

Walter Pater famously said, "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." Korman's paintings exist in a musical state.



by John Yau  
17 hours ago



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2021), oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches (all images courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery, photos by Andreas Vesterlund)

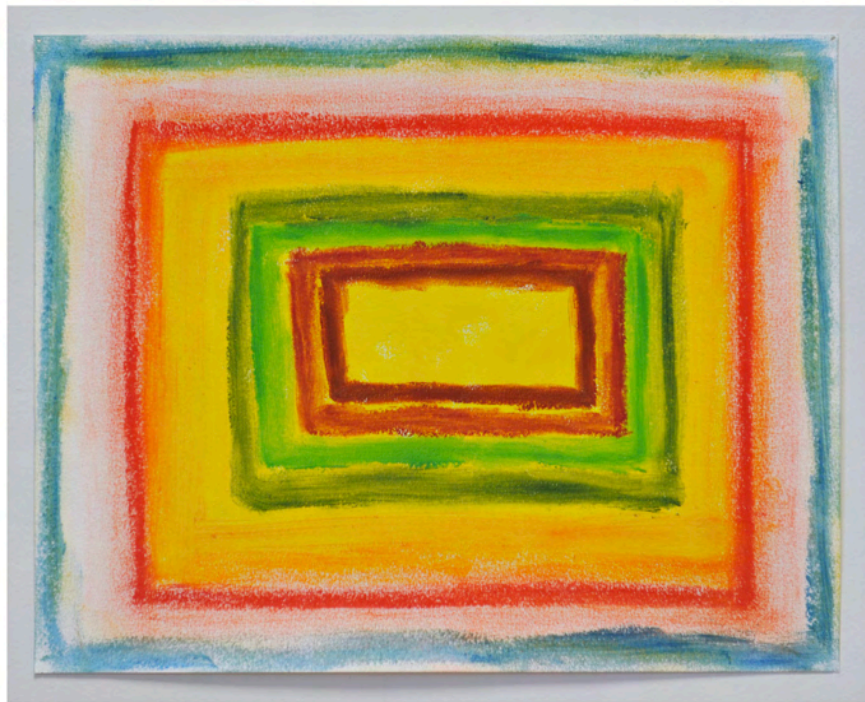
You don't need to use a lot of colors to be a great colorist. This became obvious when I saw the exhibition *Harriet Korman: New Work* at Thomas Erben Gallery (February 24–April 9, 2022), her fourth with the gallery. To further define the singularity of Korman's achievement, in contrast to many other abstract artists of her generation (she was born in the 1940s) who have been in pursuit of color, she does not nod to pop culture in her color choices, nor does she have a signature structure into which she drops her hues. Rather, she works in distinct series without any ostensible subject matter. As a consequence, she has not developed either a signature style or palette, those conventional access points the art world seems to crave. She wants the viewer to have a more direct and open encounter with her work, which is a seldom-traveled road these days.

As Korman states in the gallery press release:

In this current series, I drew to find a form I wanted to work with. These drawings are not studies, I consider drawing to be an equal practice to painting and value them as such. While drawing, I chose a very simple, familiar form of concentric rectangles because it seemed like it would be an interesting challenge. I took that form into painting without referring to the drawings, and later used the drawings as sources for the paintings.

Later, she adds:

I try to capture the dynamic in the drawings; the color relationships, the proportions, the movement — what attracts me in the drawing, not copy it. This interpolation has many obstacles, pitfalls, inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies, but ultimately is very engaging.



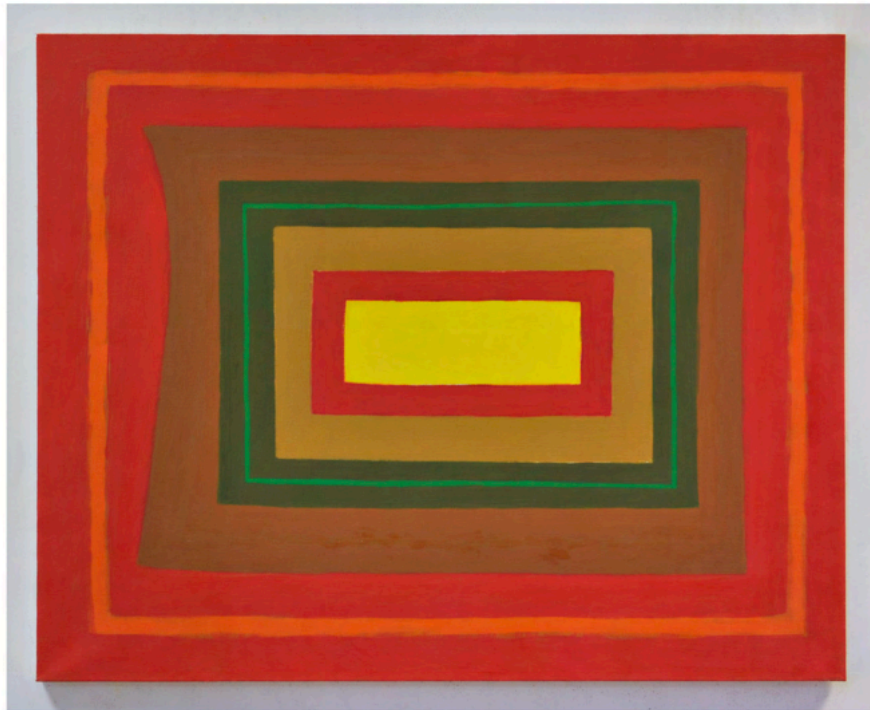
Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2019), oil stick on paper, 12 x 16 inches

Korman's interest in proportion and movement are key to the dynamic relationships that she articulates in the recent paintings. While the paintings share the formal element of concentric rectangles there is nothing formulaic about what she does; each painting comes across as distinct, hard earned, and, at times, it seems almost rudimentary.

Many artists who explore color and geometry produce variations on a form or a palette, but this is never the case with Korman. You might think that she would settle into habits but she never does. I cannot stress how fresh and exciting this is. For one thing, each painting comes across as individual and specific, rather than as a variation on a pre-established form or another fill-in-the-colors version of geometric abstraction. By designating each work as "untitled," she shortens the distance between the viewer and the art by avoiding any detours through language and its attendant associations.

The freshness of these paintings is a result of Korman starting with oil stick drawings, which are meant to stand on their own, and do. In the drawings, she proceeds improvisationally: each color rectangle and the space it takes up determines what happens next. The width of the framing rectangles is markedly different and follows no pattern. The drawings work incrementally, in a process of adding without erasing or covering over one color with another that has its roots in Jackson Pollock and his poured paintings.

Each drawing becomes a possible structure to explore. The shift from oil stick drawing to oil painting, as well as the change in scale, evokes the legendary jazz pianist Art Tatum improvising Vincent Youmans's "Tea for Two." While respecting the original song, he makes it into something all his own. When the drawings and paintings are in close proximity, it becomes apparent how much Korman has transformed one thing into another, always while respecting the nature of her materials, the porous density of the oil stick, and the smooth solidity of the oil paint.



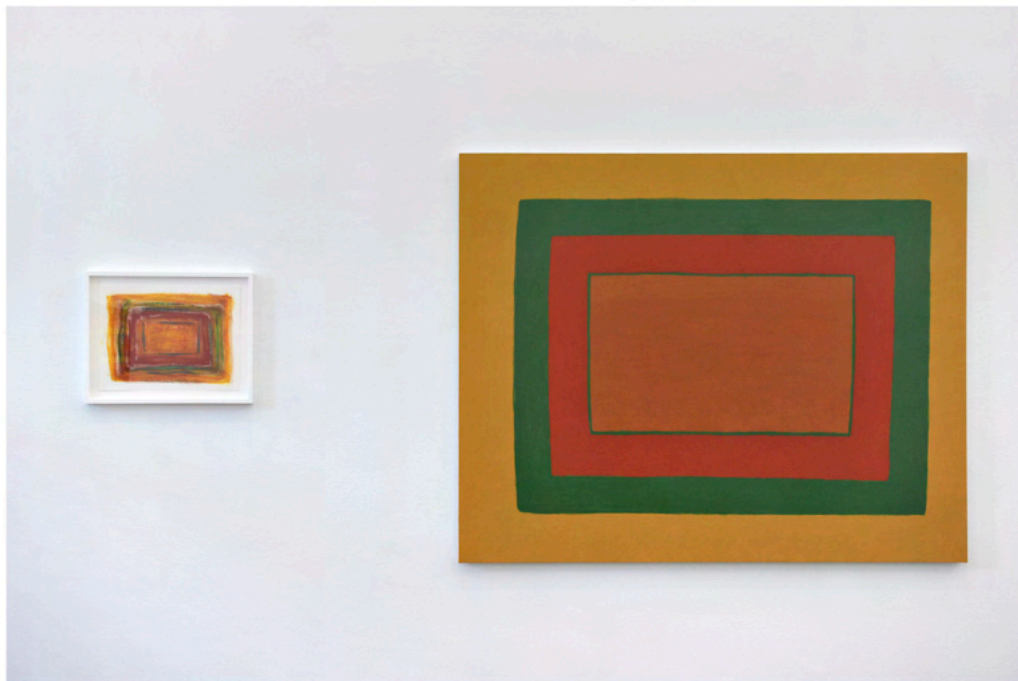
Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2019), oil on canvas, 24 x 36 inches

At the same time, there are a number of artists working this way — in which color calls to color — but I can't think of anyone as sensitive to the internal dynamics of proportion and density, and of the weight of one color against another, as Korman. These concerns, and her ability to trust her decisions without going back into the work, as if a perfect resolution existed, are why these paintings never become formulaic. Look at the ones on the gallery's longest wall and you will see that the proportions within the paintings' rectangles change and she does not work on an equally sized format: she is not programming her work according to consumers' desire for dependability. In recent years Korman has

worked with saturated colors, so her use of browns and chartreuse signal something new in her work. In the case of brown, she uses it as a neutral (neither warm nor cool), causing the other colors to gain in strength, or places two different tones in close proximity.

In fact, while I was scrutinizing the paintings, both up close and from a distance, I realized that I kept doing something that I rarely do in an exhibition. I repeatedly stood back and gazed at a group of paintings, seeing what they shared and what distinguished them, and taking particular notice of how the density of the colors changed from work to work. It is so easy to overlook this crucial difference between Korman's art and that of other artists who, for example, work within a grid structure.

Korman's geometric abstractions make those of other artists seem flabby. With many geometric abstract artists the similarities among their paintings far outweigh the differences. That this never happens with Korman's paintings should clue you into what is remarkable about them — for which she should receive more recognition. Each painting possesses a quietly unique identity.



Installation view of *Harriet Korman: New Work* at Thomas Erben Gallery. Left: "Untitled" (2019), oil stick on paper, 12 x 16 inches. Right: "Untitled" (2021), oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches

When she uses two yellows in a painting, as in "Untitled" (2021, oil on canvas, 48 by 60 inches), they are not the same, but it's the colors between them, and the width of each separating band, that makes their difference visually momentous. Walter Pater famously said, "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." Korman's paintings exist in a musical state; they compose an intuitively orchestrated set of optical vibrations that synthesize contrast and tonal shifts, large and small intervals, by underscoring difference.

She brings together different clusters and tones, some sharply contrasting and other tonally shifting. Sometimes the interval between related tones is marked by contrasting colors.

And even within the internal configuration Korman will do something unexpected, such as frame the contrasting color with a wide and a very narrow band. The overall effect is that a viewer is continuously pulled into the paintings, and will begin to notice the internal harmonies and dissonances, and how they fit together without becoming subsumed into an overarching pattern.

At one point, I limited my focus to the edges of the concentric rectangle, and how some were curved, which made the concentric planes appear as if they were billowing. Then I began accounting for all that was not a concentric rectangle: a floating, diagonal, yellow-orange brushstroke within the deep orange rectangle in the center of the painting, a brown line within the narrow, red, centered lozenge-like rectangle.

We are not meant to see Korman's paintings all at once. The kind of looking her paintings and drawings demand, and should receive, is slow. As we become more attuned to her decisions, we may realize that we cannot ascribe any other motivation than the pursuit of a unique color sensation. It is a harder goal to achieve than one might think, and Korman is one of the few who has never made a signature form, or developed a market-driven aesthetic, within that domain.

*Harriet Korman: New Work continues at Thomas Erben Gallery (526 West 26th Street, floor 4, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 9. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*



## At the Galleries

by Karen Wilkin

A few blocks farther uptown, Thomas Erben Gallery showed recent work by [Harriet Korman](#). She has long been one of the most thoughtful, often surprising abstract painters of her generation, preoccupied with the tension between the implicit regularity of geometry and the vagaries of the improvisation. In recent years, Korman's compositions have depended upon what, at first acquaintance, seem to be Euclidean shapes described by a hand uninterested in tidiness or perfection. Her current exhibition's vibrant, generous canvases, made between 2019 and 2022, continue and expand this investigation, ringing changes on a deceptively straightforward format of nested horizontal rectangles. As Korman has taught us to expect, while there is a strong family resemblance among the works, each is a stubborn individual with a different personality, different proportions, a different balance. The more time we spend with these apparently simply organized paintings, the more compelling complexities we discover. The full-throttle, slightly acidic palette turns out to be a little "off"—in a good way; Korman's hues are never nameable. Seemingly pure reds, yellows, and oranges are subtly altered, either intrinsically or by adjacent colors. The width, proportion, and rhythm of the bands forming the rectangles vary, sometimes dramatically, as do the intervals between bands and the shape they surround. Sometimes the center shifts a bit. Sequences of clean edges are punctuated by warpings, swellings, and even, on occasion, shattering. Broad brushmarks announce themselves. In one sizzling painting, a loose swipe of ochre floats against an expanse of orange surrounded by brick red and vibrating blues, crisply framed with green and yellow. Korman presents what initially appears to be a set of uncomplicated propositions and then disrupts our assumptions. Her recent paintings are immensely satisfying for their merits, at the same time that, by making us question just what is before us, they make us think about the nature of perception itself.



Harriet Korman: *Untitled*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery.

A few muscular, speedy oil stick drawings offered an intimate glimpse into Korman's thinking. They are not studies for specific paintings, but instead, independent explorations of the generating impulse for a group of works, seemingly rapid declarations of possibilities. Korman says she values them as highly as the paintings. It's easy to see why. As in the paintings, nothing is quite what it seems. Concentrate and the images become increasingly ambiguous and richer, the tug of war between ideal geometry and the refreshingly "imperfect" hand more visible and expressive, the color more intense and unexpected. There's a great deal to look at in both Korman's paintings and drawings.