

Thomas Erben Gallery



Installation view, north/west walls (photo credit: Fernando Sandoval/MW).

Harriet Korman

Portraits of Squares

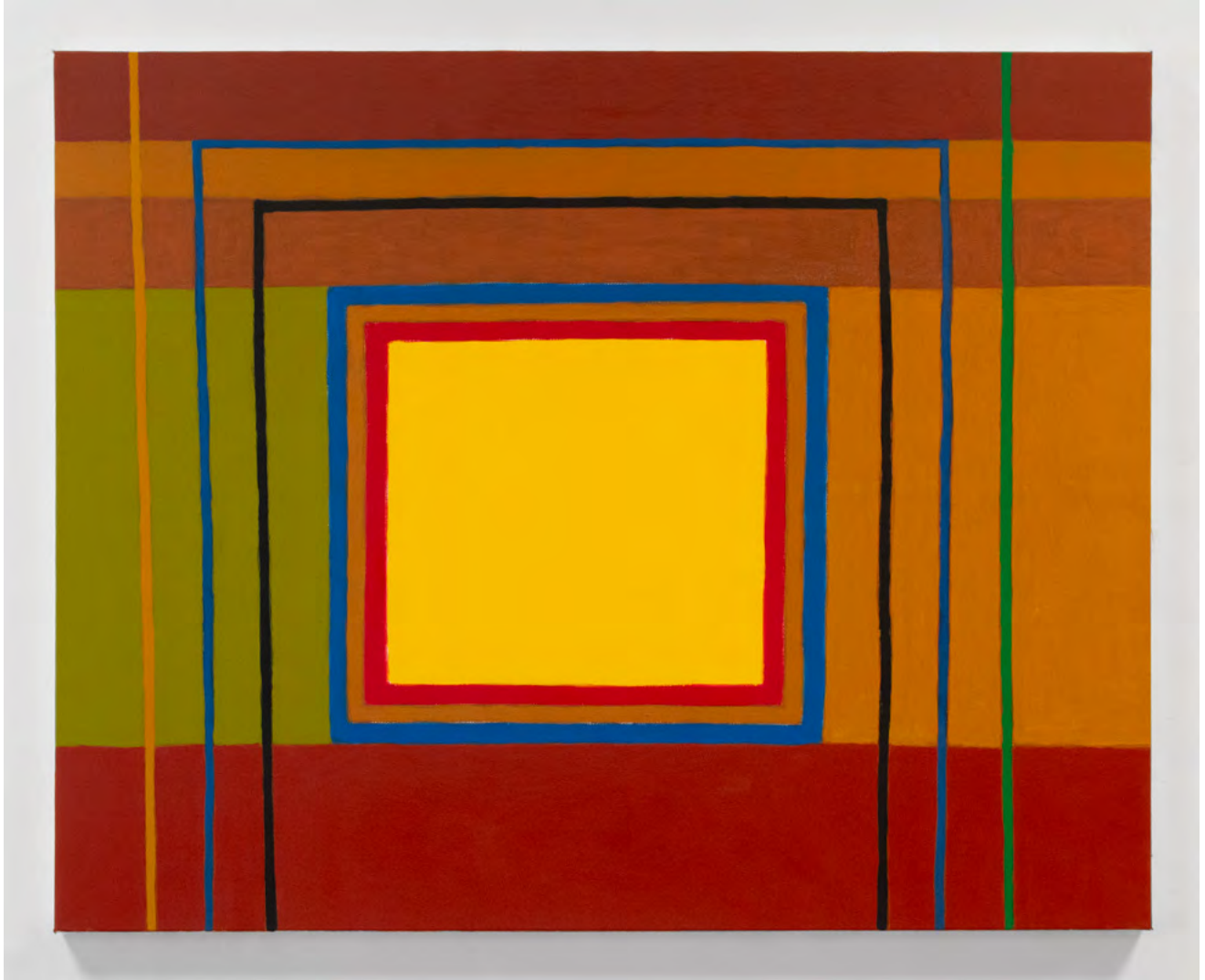
January 18 - March 2, 2024

Thomas Erben is thrilled to present *Portraits of Squares, 2022-23*, **Harriet Korman's** fifth exhibition with the gallery, one of which was a solo presentation at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2021. This group of ten new paintings exudes a visual as well as intellectual vibrancy and attraction which, by far, exceeds their modest scale. Preparing for the exhibition, Korman wrote: "Geometric Abstraction isn't always geometric abstraction. Sometimes my paintings seem to be like figures, not literal figures, but imbued with an essence of being or meaning."

Though Korman has been described "... as one of New York's purest abstract painters without a brand" (John Yau, reviewing her 2020 survey exhibition in Hyperallergic), there are clear connections between the various series in her oeuvre. These new paintings relate to the works presented in Korman's widely praised 2018 and 2021 exhibitions. In 2018, she explored a quadrant format, where each quadrant was formulated with bars of random color, resulting in different patterns, configurations, highlights and surprising outcomes. In her 2021 show, the artist used a configuration of concentric rectangles, deciphering and adjusting fast intuitive drawings into necessarily slow paintings, a process she found intriguing.

Korman sometimes employs existing formats upon which she feels she could expand in new ways. In her own words: "In 1988 at a Donald Judd exhibition at the Whitney, looking at a box on the floor, a question came to me – how many ways could I paint a square? I finally got to it – *Portraits of Squares*". For its specific properties and symbolic value, the square has often been the subject of – mainly – modernist art. Though allowing for many allusions, Korman never leaves her own idiom and tries to infuse each canvas with as much abstract identity and presence as possible.

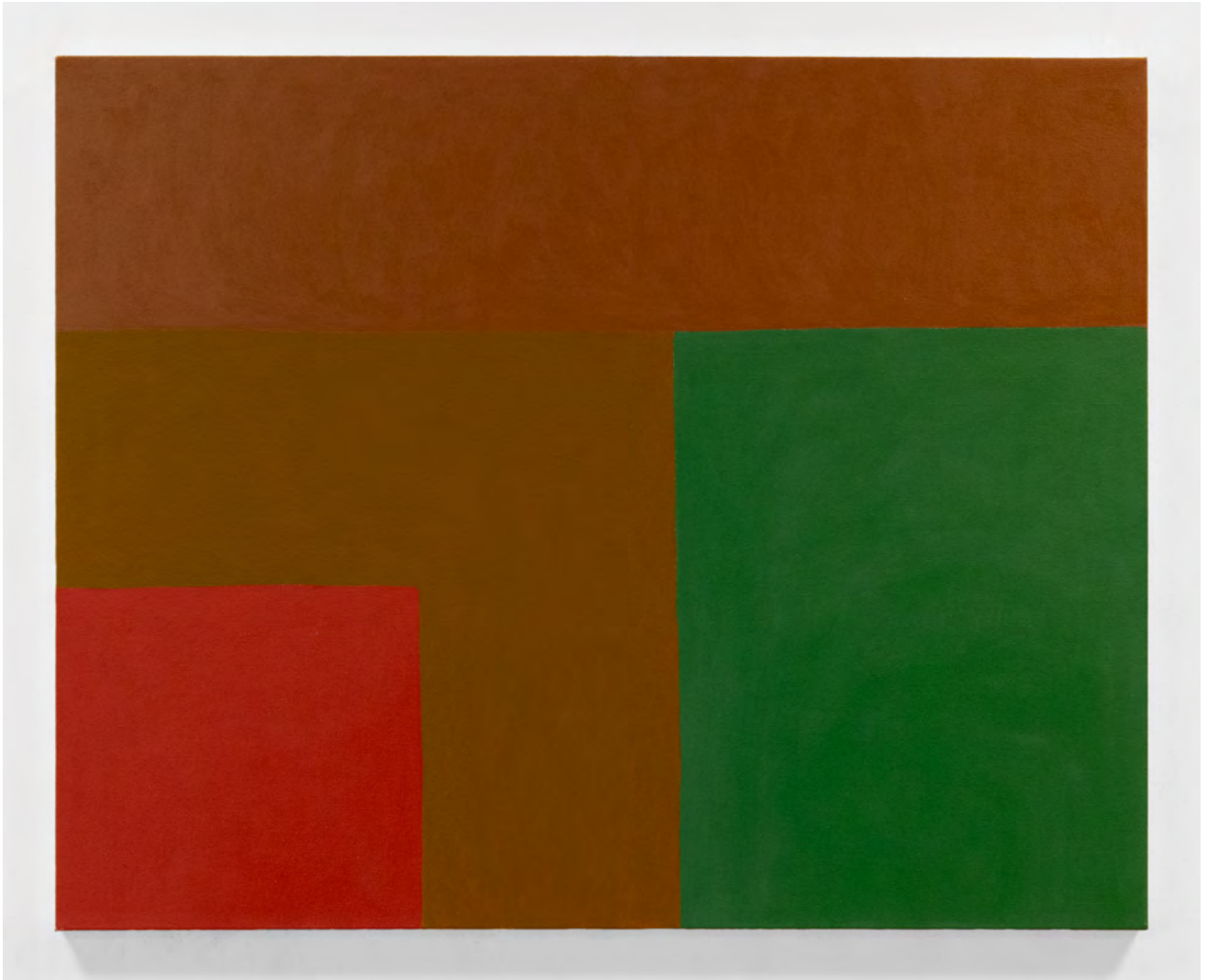
Since 1996, Korman has not mixed any white into her paint, although she sometimes uses white as a separate area. Her paintings are completely flat with no references to light, space, or illusionism, reinforcing the fact that a painting is a painting, a two-dimensional surface. However, in exploring the absolute essentials of the medium itself, she articulates an archetypal, non-dogmatic space, or, as Katy Siegel already observed in Artforum's Best of 2001: "Seeing [these stunning, abstract paintings] at Lennon Weinberg was an experience curiously out of time – these are pictures neither burdened with nostalgia nor obviously beholden to current discourses of modernist revival or rejection. Absolutely new, as if they'd always been there."



Untitled, 2022
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in.



Installation view, west wall (photo credit: Fernando Sandoval/MW).



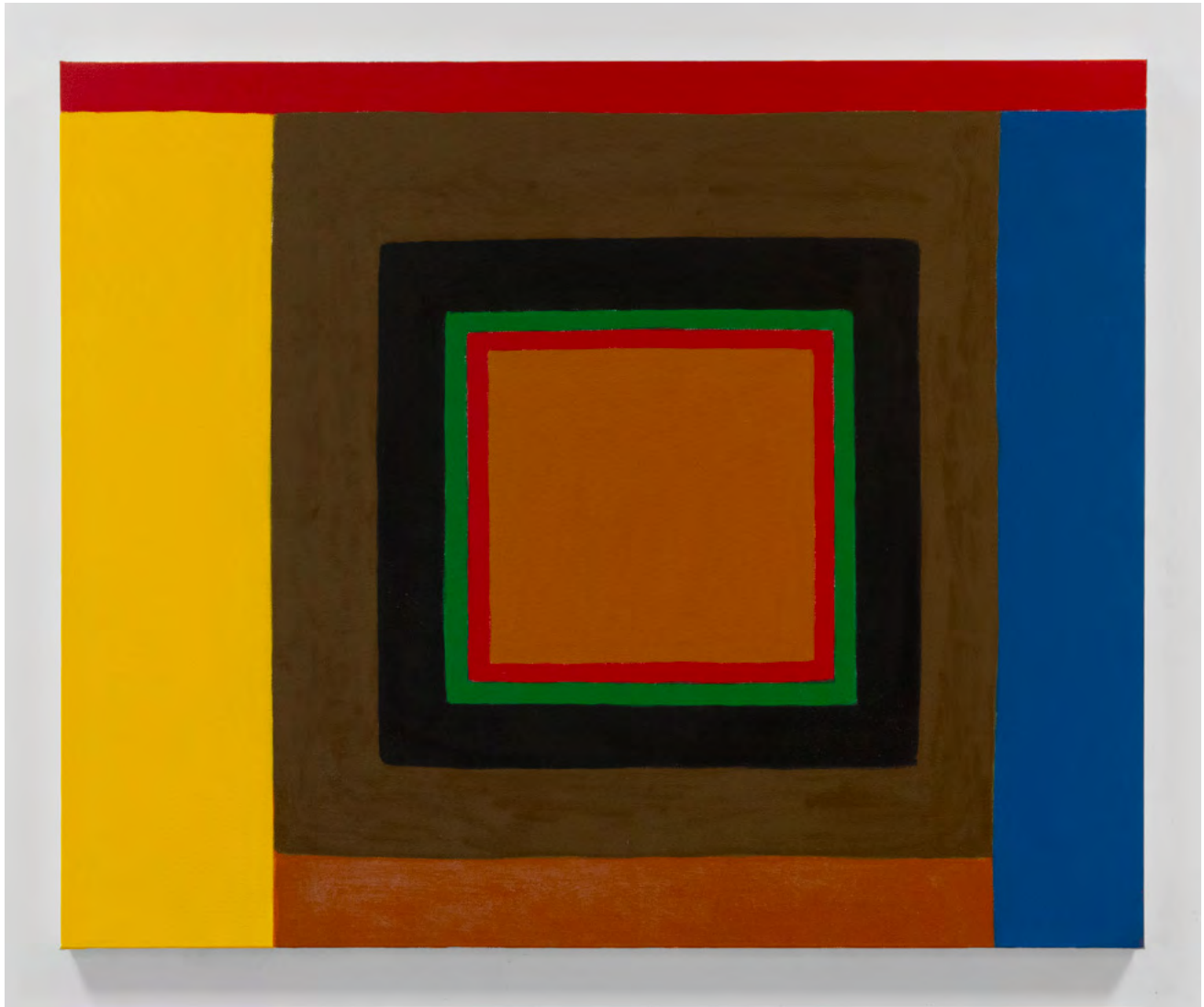
Untitled, 2022
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in.



Untitled, 2023
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in.



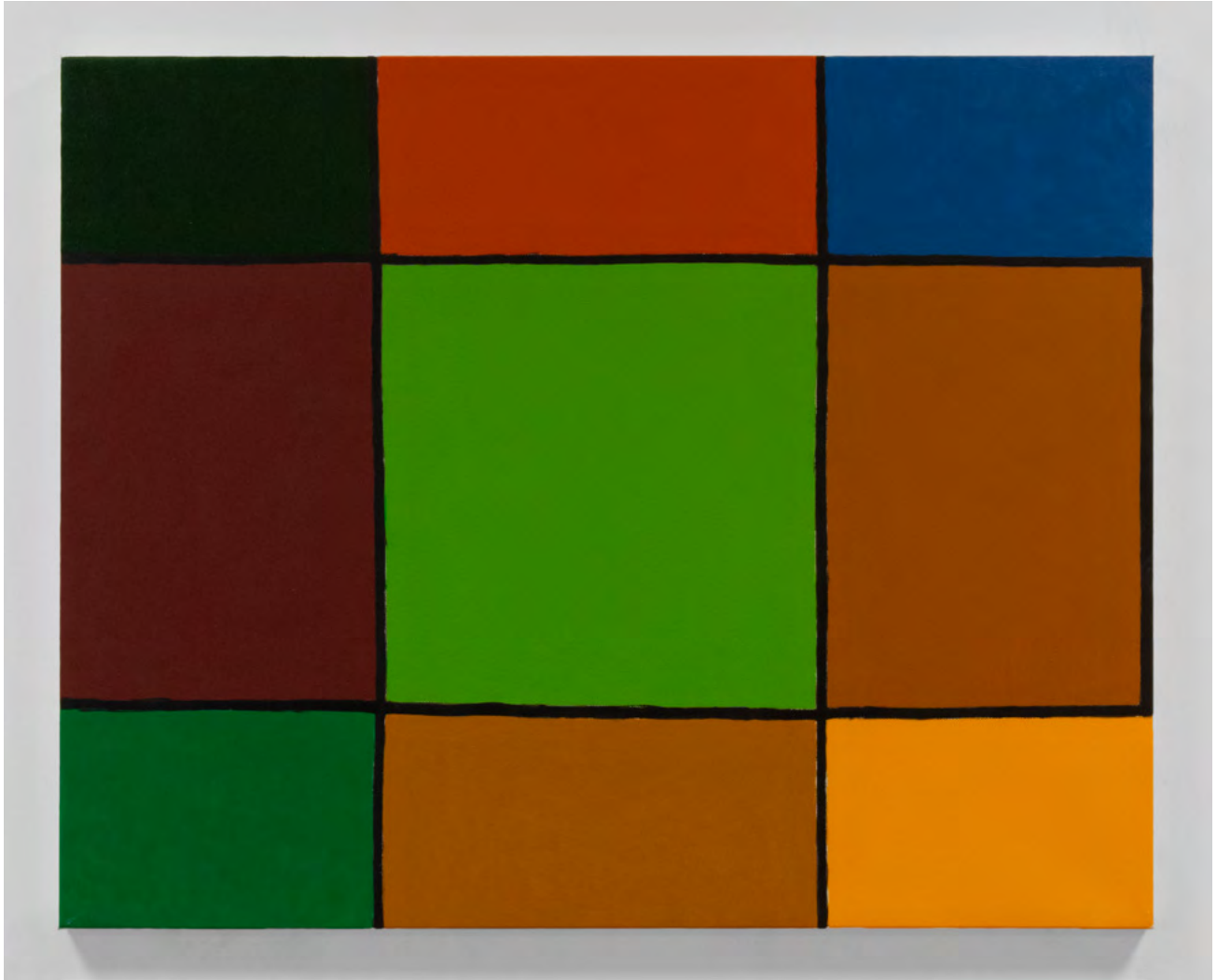
Installation view, north/west walls (photo credit: Fernando Sandoval/MW).



Untitled, 2022
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in.



Untitled, 2023
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in.



Untitled, 2023
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in.



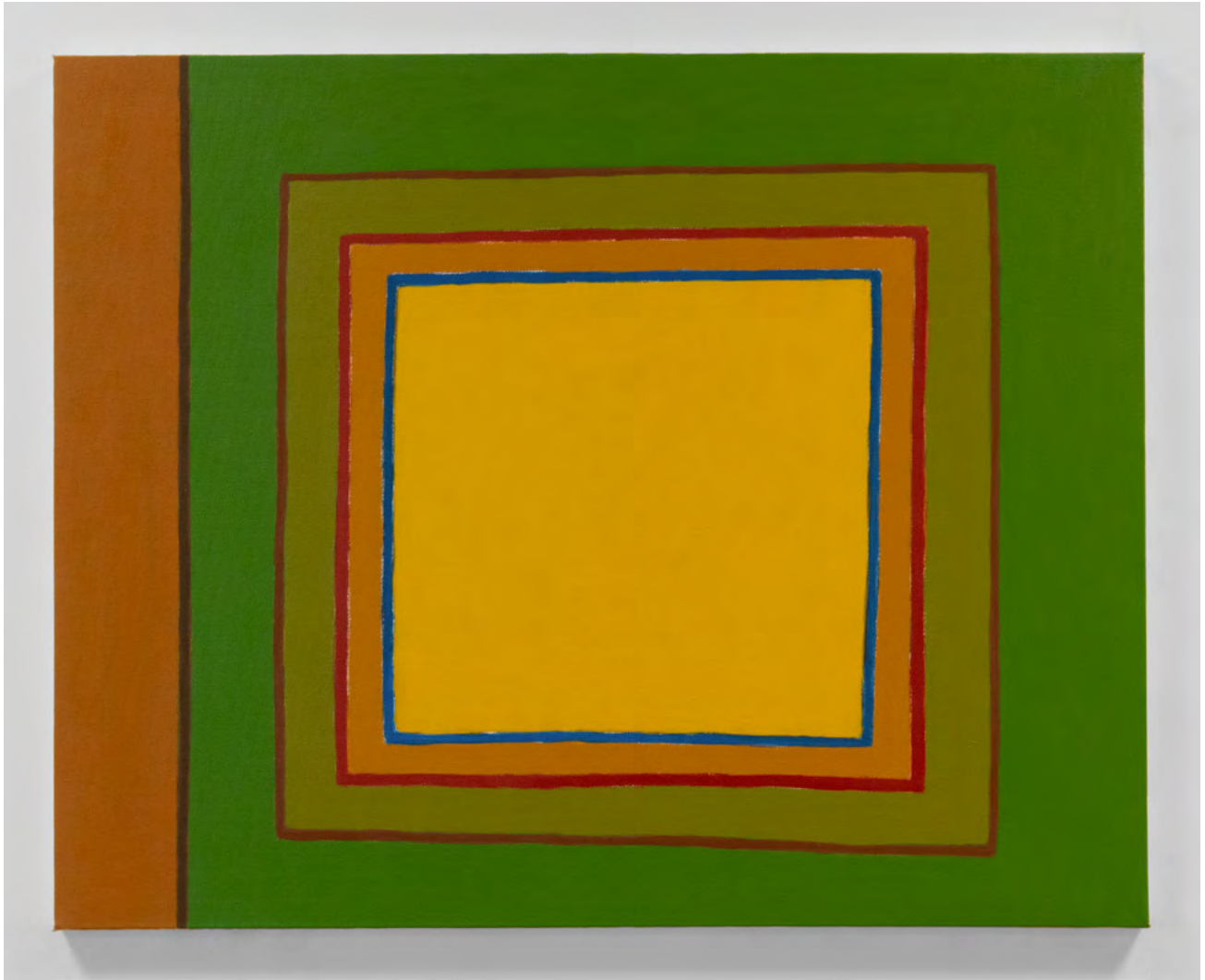
Installation view, *Untitled*, 1979 (photo credit: Fernando Sandoval/MW).



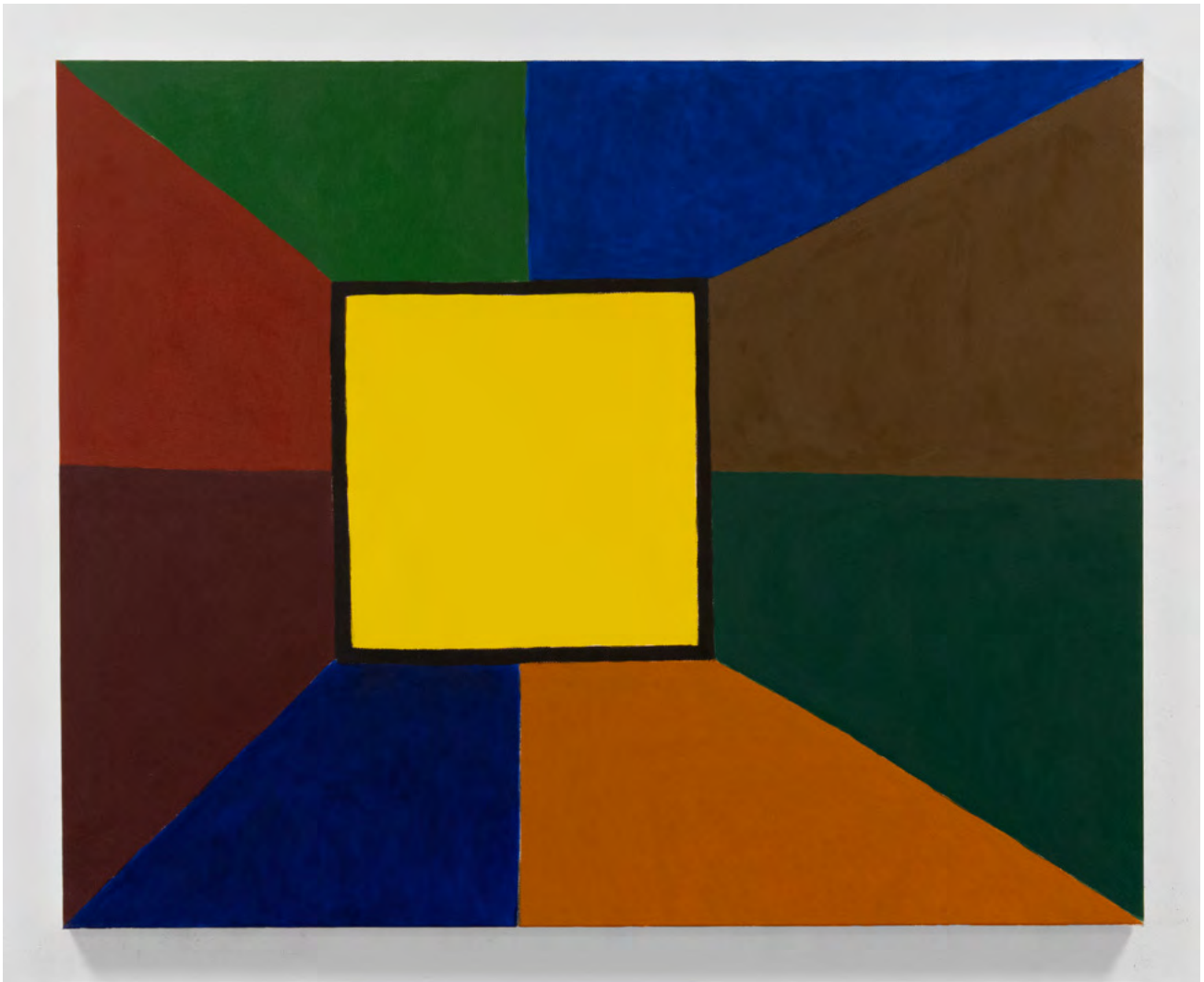
Untitled, 1979
Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in.



Installation view, south/east walls (photo credit: Fernando Sandoval/MW).



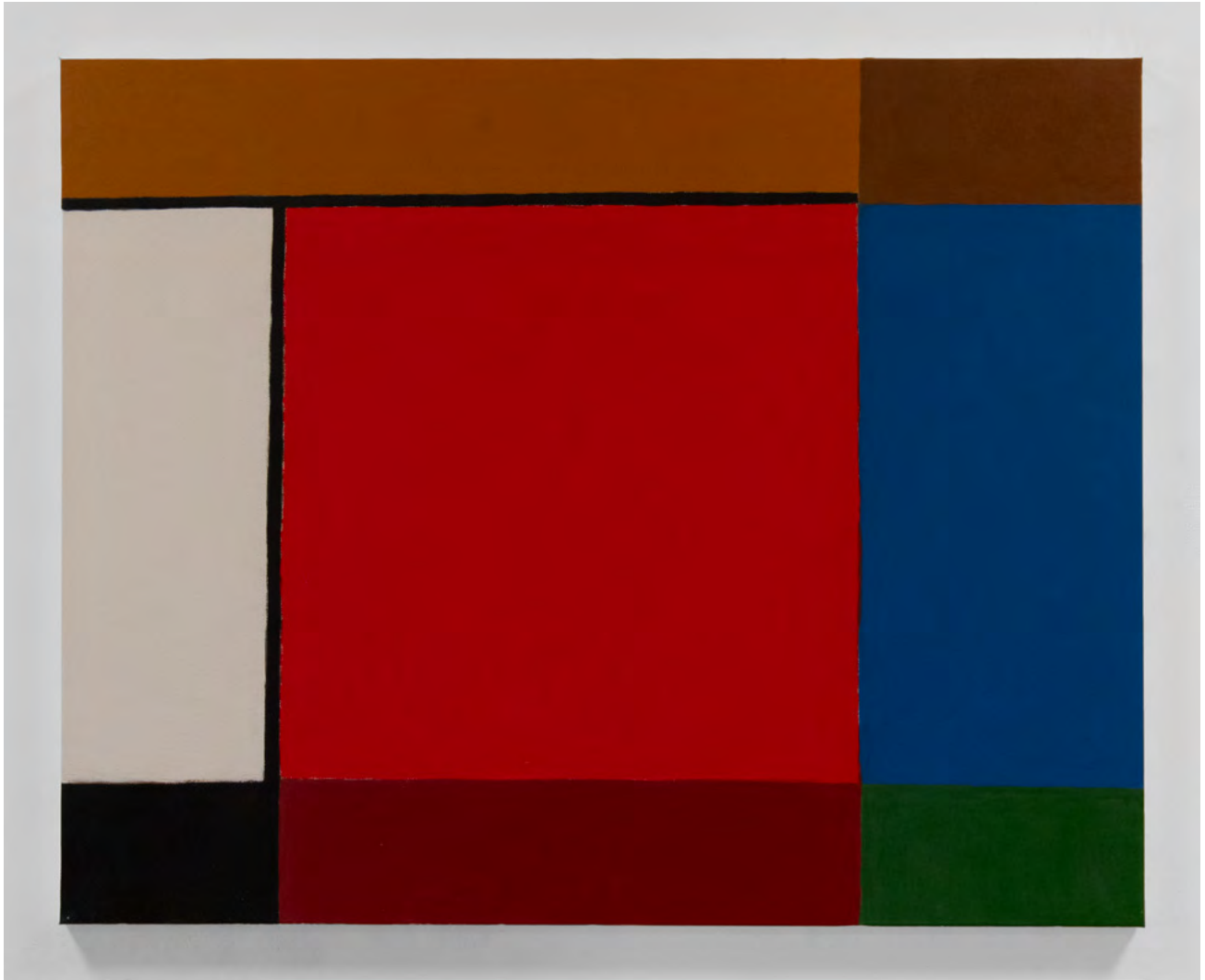
Untitled, 2022
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in.



Untitled, 2023
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in.



Untitled, 2023
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in.



Untitled, 2023
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in.

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.

Several of her paintings recently entered the **Kienzle Art Foundation collection**, Berlin, where they were part of a group show with works by Louise Fishman, Gerald Jackson, Jonathan Lasker, David Reed, Gary Stefan, and Jack Whitten (2022). Her work was also included in the 30th anniversary exhibition at **Carlier Gebauer**, Berlin (2021/22), 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 (two-person show with Frank Stella, 1977), and **Häusler Contemporary**, Munich (2015).

In the U.S., Korman has participated in the **Whitney Annual** (1972), two **Whitney Biennials** (1973 and 1995), and was included in *Ten Young Artists - The Theodoron Awards* at the **Guggenheim Museum** (1971), as well as the traveling exhibition *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-75*, and 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.**

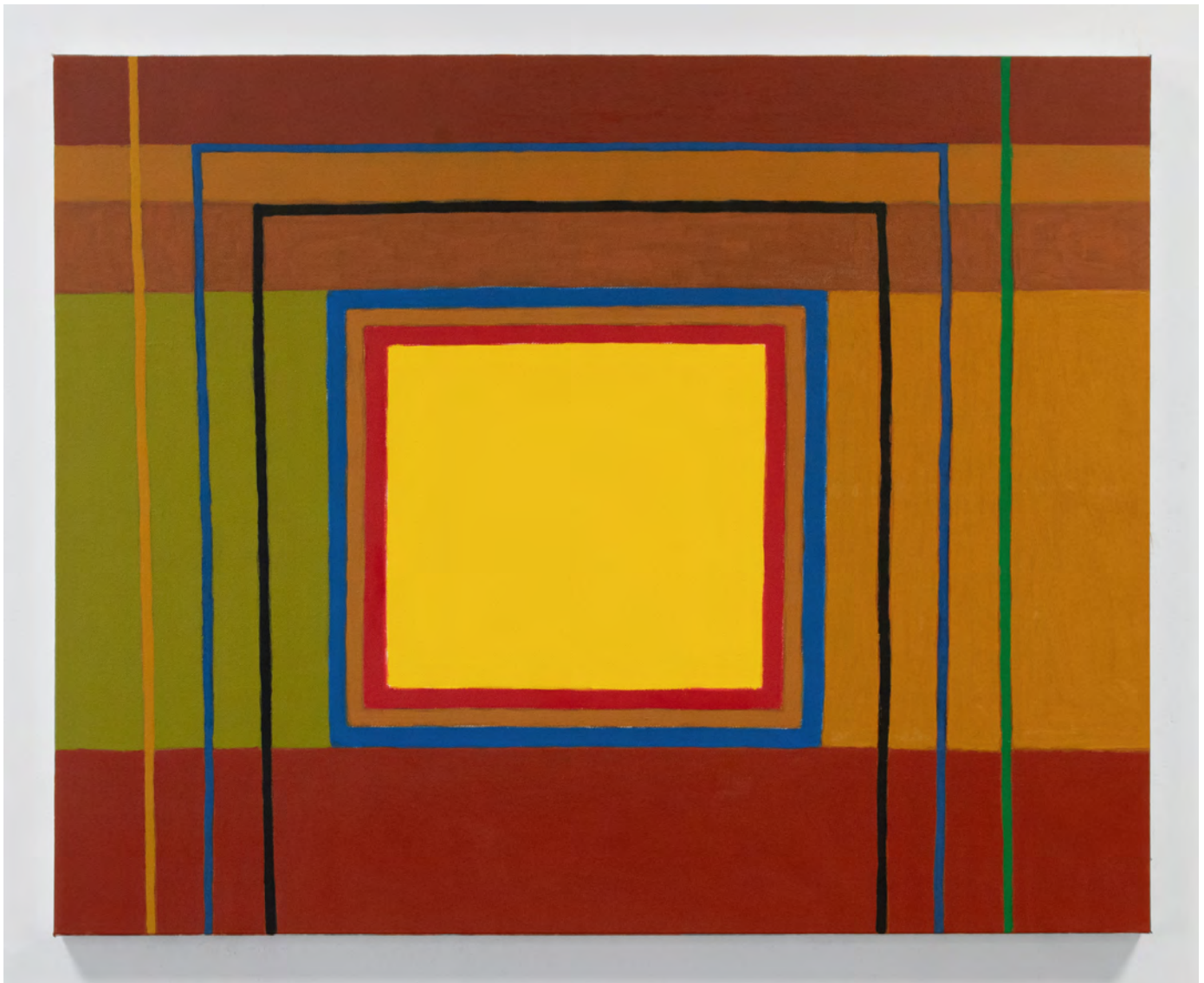
Art **Reviews**

Harriet Korman's Nonchalant Rigor

What surprised me about Korman's new works was the degree of inventiveness I encountered in her off-kilter compositions.



John Yau February 11, 2024



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2022), oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches (Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery, photos by Sabrina Slavin)

Harriet Korman's paintings are simultaneously rigorous and nonchalant. Her palette is unlike anyone else's. The 10 oil paintings in her current exhibition, *Portraits of Squares* at Thomas Erben Gallery, all dated 2022 or '23 and measuring 24 by 30 inches, are dominated by different hues of brown, along with various reds, blues, greens, and yellows, and black and white. She never adds white to any of her colors and wants the surface of her shapes uniformly solid. The edges are irregular, as she does not use tape. The wildest form we see in this exhibition is a trapezoid. As might be expected from Korman's faith in abstraction and painting's power to stir up feelings in the

viewer without being guided by language, all the works are untitled.

One painting from 2023 incorporates white as color, and a handful of others use black. These colors are assigned no more importance than any others, and each painting has a distinct palette, while her squares are different sizes and occupy different places in the picture plane, making every composition in this series of works unique. The show also includes an early square painting, “Untitled” (1979), on the wall behind the gallery desk. Its color combination (three greens, dark violet, and brown) hints at what is to come.

Seen together, what surprised me about Korman’s new works was the degree of inventiveness I encountered in her off-kilter compositions. The artist, who has always been creative with the simplest means, is even more so in this exhibition — she gets more out of less while making it look easy.

In another 2023 painting, a bright yellow square sits off center, eight trapezoids in different colors extending from its four sides to the edges of the canvas. While this configuration suggests rays of sunlight, the trapezoids’ colors (four shades of brown, two blues, and two greens) deny this reading. Nothing adds up to tell a pictorial story, but it all makes perfect sense, as the rectangles of dark, muted colors hold the bright yellow square in place. Here and in the rest of the show, it’s as if she set out to discover how many ways she could define a square within a rectangle, while using only straight-edged shapes, lines, and color. A subtle, nuanced humor to her work keeps upending the viewer’s expectations.

Two paintings on view are divided into eight rectangles surrounding a central square, one green and the other brownish red. In the former, a black line between all the sections seems to change depending on the adjacent color. Yet because Korman does not outline the edges of the canvas in black, the surrounding rectangles seem to extend beyond the pictorial space. The bright green square stands out, at once distinct from and held in place by the rectangles.

In the latter, the rectangles press tectonically against the central square. The brightest section is the yellow rectangle in the upper left-hand corner. While the color pulls our attention toward it, the larger space of the center square counteracts that pull. Size and color engage in a dance throughout the work, as if all the rectangles are in an animated conversation with each other. Her use of colors from one family (brown or blue, for example) in unpredictable tandem with contrasts of warm and cool, bright and muted, are unmistakably hers. More importantly, she frees her colors from all associations, so that I came to feel that she was making portraits of colors as much as of squares.

Korman’s synthesis of order and unpredictability enlivens her paintings, makes every part of them possess a unique identity, from line to band to triangle to rectangle and square. Her bag of tricks is to have none, and to keep pushing her work beyond what she has previously done, which is considerable. This is why I think she is a major artist who has still not gotten her proper due. Never flashy, uninterested in nodding to Pop Art, and rejecting the safety net of a signature style or format, her nonchalant approach (which she shares with Mary Heilmann, for example) is fused with her idiosyncratic rigor. It is this combination that distinguishes her from other geometric abstract artists. A career survey and institutional monograph are long earned.

ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

JANUARY 31, 2024 BY SAUL OSTROW

Harriet Korman's Brutal Realism

OPINION



Photo credit: Fernando Sandoval/MW

In Harriet Korman's exhibition titled Portraits of Squares, the squares in question are either nested within the framework of a grid or stand alone as discreet entities surrounded by blocks of color. Her palette, in the main, is made of secondary and tertiary colors, which for the most part, are applied in an opaque and unmodulated

manner — her surfaces tend to be flat and dry. Korman uses color both as a formal element to reinforce her composition's structure as well as spatially. As one moves around the gallery, there seems to be no logical progression or sense to the paintings' variations. The canvases, all of the same dimensions, are rectangular and are hung on the horizontal at eye level; their sequencing refuses to surrender an associative, conceptual, or anecdotal narrative. What one is left with is the fact they all, in part, reference squares and that they are all relatively different in approach. Subsequently, it is hard to determine if the "portraits" represent systemic deviations on a singular theme or if each painting was individually intuited. Behind the reception desk hangs a painting from 1979 whose forms are organic, their edges blurred, and whose surface is mottled. This painting stands as a reminder that Korman works thematically, and the present paintings are an aspect of her broader investigation of abstract painting's various idioms.

Owing no allegiance to any particular approaches to abstract painting, Korman's works are challenging not because they eschew stylistic categorization but because initially, there is something aesthetically off-putting about them — they seem amateurish, maybe naïve — innocent — simplistic. One is not quite sure what there is to like or not to like about them, nor even if they are meant to be liked at all. Without any claim to skillfulness, the drawing of lines and the edges of her forms are free-hand. The resulting forms are irregular, yet they are neither innovative nor truly eccentric, instead they just seem to have been matter-of-factly drawn by hand. Similarly, her compositions are obvious and straight forward— they have the familiarity of having been ready-mades — there is no inventiveness here, for the sake of being clever or appealing. Each painting instead, seems to be an exercise in itself, the solution to a problem that has gone unarticulated. For these reasons, Korman's work might be thought of as being brutally real. Yet, there is also something of Paul Klee in Korman's work; her intuitive use of color and the imperfections that arise from everything having been hand-drawn adds a human element that contrasts with the precision associated with geometric abstract painting.

In some of the paintings, the squares have been embellished with lines or bands of color — these are as close as Korman gets to the decorative. For the most part, there is nothing in her paintings that is meant to openly appeal to taste. And yes, while here and there, there are unexpected, quirky decisions or visual references to other artists, such

as Albers or Mondrian, these are more generic than specific and, therefore, may be chance occurrences rather than intentional. Yet, because of their specificity, Korman's work does not fit into what the critic Raphael Rubinstein has identified as provisional paintings, a term he applies to those artists who have deliberately turned away from "strong" painting for something that seems to constantly risk failure or of being inconsequential. So, while with Korman's works, there is no culminating moment, no punchline, or hint of irony; neither are there the theatrics of tentativeness and self-effacement. Instead, her work is merely slow and deliberate.

To understand Korman's odd synthesis in the broader context of abstract paintings' evolution since the 1970s, it is necessary to remember Korman's informative years are those of post-Minimalism, which may be characterized as being phenomenological in its approach, emphasizing cognition and doubt. In keeping with her post-minimalist roots Korman approaches her work not as an object or picture but as an event — one that does not just happen all at once but is a conglomerate of a multitude of other events, which are a result of her varied deliberations. In turn, she has wed this aesthetic to the modernist project of conveying the intrinsic qualities of the abstract painting.

Korman's numerous negations result in an indexical cancelation of the normative expectations as to what her works should be. Reacting not only to abstract painting's historical context but also to its prevailing norms, Korman shapes a nuanced dialogue between the distinct visions that make up that genre, whose interplay has been the driving force of its diverse evolution. In doing so, she also cancels the notion of progress but not that of change. Each painting is a proposition as to what an abstract painting is rather than what more it can be — such questions she leaves to others. Subsequently, her exploration of geometric forms, color, and simplicity goes beyond strict categorization in a way that suggests she is engaged in a dialogue between order and intuition that seeks to bridge the gap between the artist's intentions and the viewer's subjective encounter.

I know that Korman knows how to make these paintings more appealing, more accessible but instead, she has chosen to leave us with the endless drum roll of our expectations while presenting us with her unforgiving, matter-of-fact, personalized formalisms. Yet, if one stays with her works as long as it takes, abruptly one may realize that what they are experiencing is the truthfulness of Korman's restraint — her

discipline, which has resulted in the negation of all we expect her geometric abstract paintings should be. In stead, she uses her pared-down vocabulary to reminds us of the variety of competing models and aesthetic diversity that falls under the rubric of abstract art. This brings to my mind the work of Cora Cohen, who, without the geometry — though similar in ethos to Korman — took an uncompromising approach to abstract painting. Cohen rather than being concerned with figuration, solely focused on painterly gesture and process.

Recently, I wrote about David Rhodes's show at High Noon (Brooklyn Rail, Feb. 2024), whose aesthetic would seem to be very different from that of Korman, but in actuality, both painters are perverse minimalists concerned with painting's pictorial means rather than its objectification. The reason I bring Rhodes' review up here is that I believe that Korman, like Rhodes, seeks the Truth in painting. Obviously, Rhodes' truth is very different than Korman's, yet the statement still stands, for what is meant by the Truth in painting is taken from Jacques Derrida, who argues that painting (art) to differing degrees of accuracy has the ability to call into question the varied ways we understand the world — in other words, it challenges our cognitive presumptions/assumptions. This is exactly what Korman's paintings do — they question our aesthetic expectations as to what an abstract painting already is. Though less histrionic, Korman's ethos can be likened to that of Ad Reinhardt's "Art as Art" manifesto, the significant difference being his works has come to be associated with a transcendentalism that undermines its cognitive function, which is something one would never imagine happening with Korman's work. Instead, doggedly she pursues a materialist agenda of reductivism, repetition, and difference so that we might experience what she has put before us without recourse to analogy.

Harriet Korman, Portraits of Squares January 18 to March 2, 2024 at Thomas Erben



matthewhiggs2015



matthewhiggs2015 Happening now. 😊 Harriet Korman with her (amazing) work at Thomas Erben. Among the best shows we will see in 2024. The opening runs through 8.30pm tonight. The show runs through March 2. Unmissable. 🤝
@harriekorman @thomaserbengallery #harriekorman

1w



kylestaver ❤️ Such a knockout show!

1w 1 like Reply



javiermendez70 ❤️🔥

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maureen_dougherty_ Fab to the point greatness

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o.rosenblat She keeps outdoing herself. ❤️❤️❤️ Fantastic show!

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57w57arts Looks like such a beautiful show. Congratulations.

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tamaragonzales 🏆🏆🏆

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amy_smithstewart ❤️

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THE DISSIDENT

Harriet Korman: *Portraits of Squares*

Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

By Gwenaël Kerlidou, February 12, 2024

"Portraits of Squares", the title of Harriet Korman's latest exhibition of paintings at the Thomas Erben Gallery in Chelsea, would easily constitute a full-fledged agenda in and of itself. At first, it might seem to reference "Homage to the Square" Joseph Albers' title for a well-known series of paintings about color variations in a predetermined format of squares within squares. But where Albers' Modernism posited the figure of the square as the ultimate paradigm for formal perfection, the plural in Korman's title is the first hint that this essential relationship is being subjected here to a very different reading.

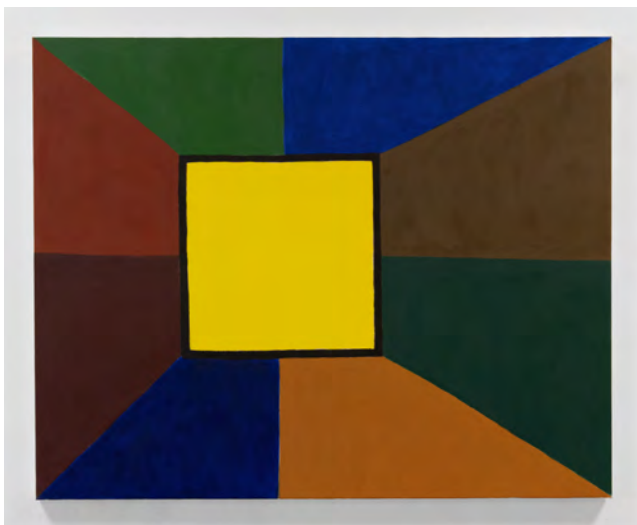
The square is indeed the central figure of the ten new untitled paintings in the show, all from 2022-23 and all 24" x 30", but it is unexpectedly set in the changing landscape of a horizontal format. As in a typical portrait gallery, installed at such a height as to face the viewer and stare back at them, their scale proportional to the size of a human face, these squares unabashedly expose their quirks and personalities.

Just as Korman's persistent un-titling of her paintings is a rejection of any kind of literary, poetic, or theoretical projections into the work, her insistence on small or medium-sized formats, which has long been understood as a critique of the grand declarative gesture, whether it be from the Ab Ex generation, the Minimalists or Postminimalists, is meant here to keep our attention centered on the point being made by the installation.

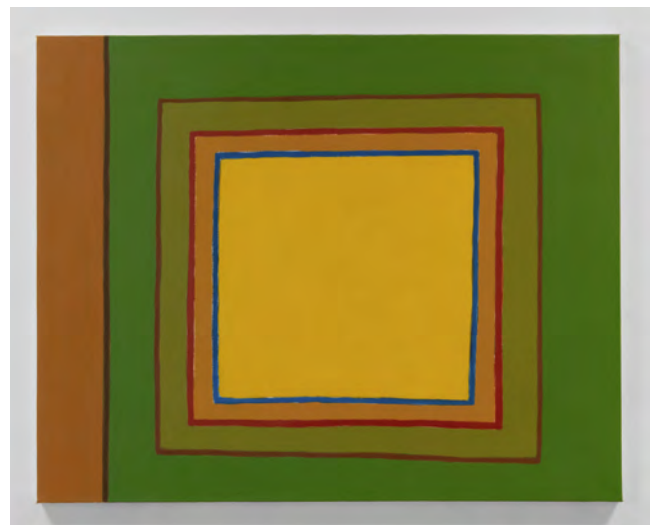
These are meta-geometric paintings referencing the epistemic figure of Modernism but "portrayed" here with all the imperfections and the individual humanity conveyed by traditional portraiture. Loosely hand-drawn, instead of being straightforwardly geometric, they forfeit any notion of mastery and control. Reinforcing the impression of intentional imperfection and adding to a general sense of misadjustment, they are also frequently decentered within their format. Sometimes to a point where a band of color might fill the gap between the off-center square and the painting's edge, which brings to mind Brice Marden's use of the same decentering compositional device, but horizontally for mostly vertical formats in his case, in an exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery in 2021.

For the viewer who has been following Korman's work over the years, this latest development will confirm the continuity of her concerns. Her previous exhibition at the gallery in 2022 featured rectangles in mostly larger formats and in a similar palette of earth tones, accompanied by their more spontaneous and unruly preparatory drawings in oil sticks on paper. Uncharacteristically, this year's show doesn't include any works on paper: The artist worked on these latest paintings directly without any prior planning.

In Korman's long career, each exhibition has been the occasion for exploring a different set of propositions, approaching its subject (the rectangle, the square, the grid, the division of the surface, etc.) each time from an indirect angle rather than frontally. More than variations on a theme, these paintings are about the exploration of the range of possible scenarios that could unfold out of shared premises, while at the same time, each self-contained series develops its internal critique of those very same premises. Combining her sometimes improbable decisions with a no-fuss approach to painting, Korman has been using this kind of oblique criticism for years as a strategy to subvert the expectations of what abstract painting should be. With its pared-down formulation, this show makes a concise renewed argument for abstraction as a state of mind, rather than as a stage of history.



Untitled, 2023. Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches (Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery, photo by Sabrina Slavin)



Untitled, 2022. Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches (Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery, photo by Sabrina Slavin)

The concept of protocol has been a very useful tool to circle abstract painting lately. What one usually means by protocol in this context is a set of predetermined processes and formal/conceptual decisions elected as a method to execute a series of works, regardless of its outcome. In Korman's case the most noticeable part of her protocol might look as this: No mixed colors, colors used straight out of the tube, no white paint, (but the white of the canvas is acceptable), hand-drawn intuitive geometries (instead of ruler or tape-controlled lines) and a different series of works for each new gallery show.

Besides their intentionally modest sizes, what reinforces a sense of close connection to the paintings for the viewer is their mostly dark and warm backgrounds of earthy, sometimes muddy, overtone. In contrast to the modernist palette of pure luminous primary colors, over the years Korman has developed a very specific palette of highly saturated pigments, which unexpectedly includes a variety of brown and green earth tones flirting ambiguously with what one may think of as the result of mixing colors.

In "The Readymade And The Tube Of Paint", his perceptive essay from 1989, Thierry de Duve examines Duchamp's fascination for Georges Seurat's use of pure color straight out of the recently (then) commercialized tube of paint. De Duve argues that the brown color conceptually produced by Duchamp's 1914 Chocolate Grinder is a critical response to the Post-Impressionists' increasingly decorative use of pure color.

As the Impressionists notoriously eliminated pure black from their palettes, Korman banned pure white from hers. Spatial ambiguities are the last thing on her mind. She intended to avoid gradations of values, which create the illusion of depth in a painting, and to emphasize pigment intensity in color relationships, in order to reach a better definition of shape through color.

It might be interesting to note in passing that Albers painted his famous squares by spreading the paint straight out of the tube with a palette knife on the back of Masonite boards -the bumps of which acted as a sort of canvas weave.

The point here is that in these latest groups of paintings Korman gets to keep her chocolate cake and eat it too. She gets the best of both worlds without resorting to mixed colors: the use of pure colors straight out of the tube and their brownish antithesis, the transcendent Modernist primary colors as well as their muddy desublimation, merging the two sides of the coin in a single work.

Regardless of the dynamics of influences, it is sometimes helpful to invoke other painters to get a better grasp of someone's intent. Two such figures who come to mind when thinking of Korman's work are Martin Barré and James Bishop. Each one is a good example of a kind of enigmatic abstraction pushed to the extreme. And both are equally far from the assumptions of the death of painting that prevailed in the New York art scene of the seventies, the early years of Korman's career, assumptions which she's been contesting from the beginning.

Coincidentally, the Matthew Marks Gallery is currently showing a series of fourteen paintings from 1977-78, conceived by Barré as one single work and which has never been seen before in the US. Korman seems to share quite a few of Barré's premises about painting: such as the rejection of the emphatic gesture, an apparent indifference to the quality of the painter's touch, an ambivalent reliance on geometry, an approach to the series as a closed system meant to be subverted, the evolution of the work as a series of series, as well as the idea of presenting a new series with every new show, each time examining the issue from a different angle. But there are obvious differences; Korman's self-contained space differs significantly from Barré's conception of painted space as a continuum extending beyond the physical limits of a series.



Untitled, 2023. Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches (Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery, photo by Sabrina Slavin)

Regarding Bishop, besides their shared affinities for intuitive geometries, and a reaction to the rigid precepts of Minimalism, it is the question of color that brings them together. In an issue of the periodical *Transatlantique* dedicated to him in 2021, Korman mused on Bishop's predilection for ambiguous earth tones. In Bishop's case I would argue that his sense of color might have something to do with Motherwell's fascination with the Spanish light (and the color of the dry dirt, as in Antoni Tàpies' matterist paintings), as much as with the need to emphasize impurity in reaction to the color purism of concrete abstractionists such as Ellsworth Kelly, for example. "Le marron; la merde", as Marc Devade -a member of Supports/Surfaces, who also looked very closely at Bishop's work- might have said back then, with his typical psychoanalytical approach to color.

In Korman's work, as in Barré's or Bishop's, we aren't in an idealist Modernist world anymore, but neither are we in an ironically referential Postmodern one. We are, one may say, one foot in the phenomenological experience of painting as an object, and one foot in the conceptual realm of painting as an idea. From the start, her whole enterprise has been imbued with a healthy resistance to preconceived discourses on painting.

Is Korman a contrarian or a dissident? Is she someone who rejects the doxa (as Pierre Bourdieu would have it) by principle, or someone who accepts it, but points to its limits and flaws, someone who begs to dissent?

It is her privilege and ambiguity to be a bit of both. While avoiding postmodern eclecticism and being as close as one can be to rejecting the identity of a signature style, she remains true to an initial set of beliefs in abstraction: Quite a delicate balancing act to perform painting after painting, series after series.

Dear viewer, listen to what these "portrayed" squares are whispering to us: The beauty of art is in the deviations from the model, and, as in painting, the meaning of life is in the myriads of seemingly insignificant decisions we all take every day.