

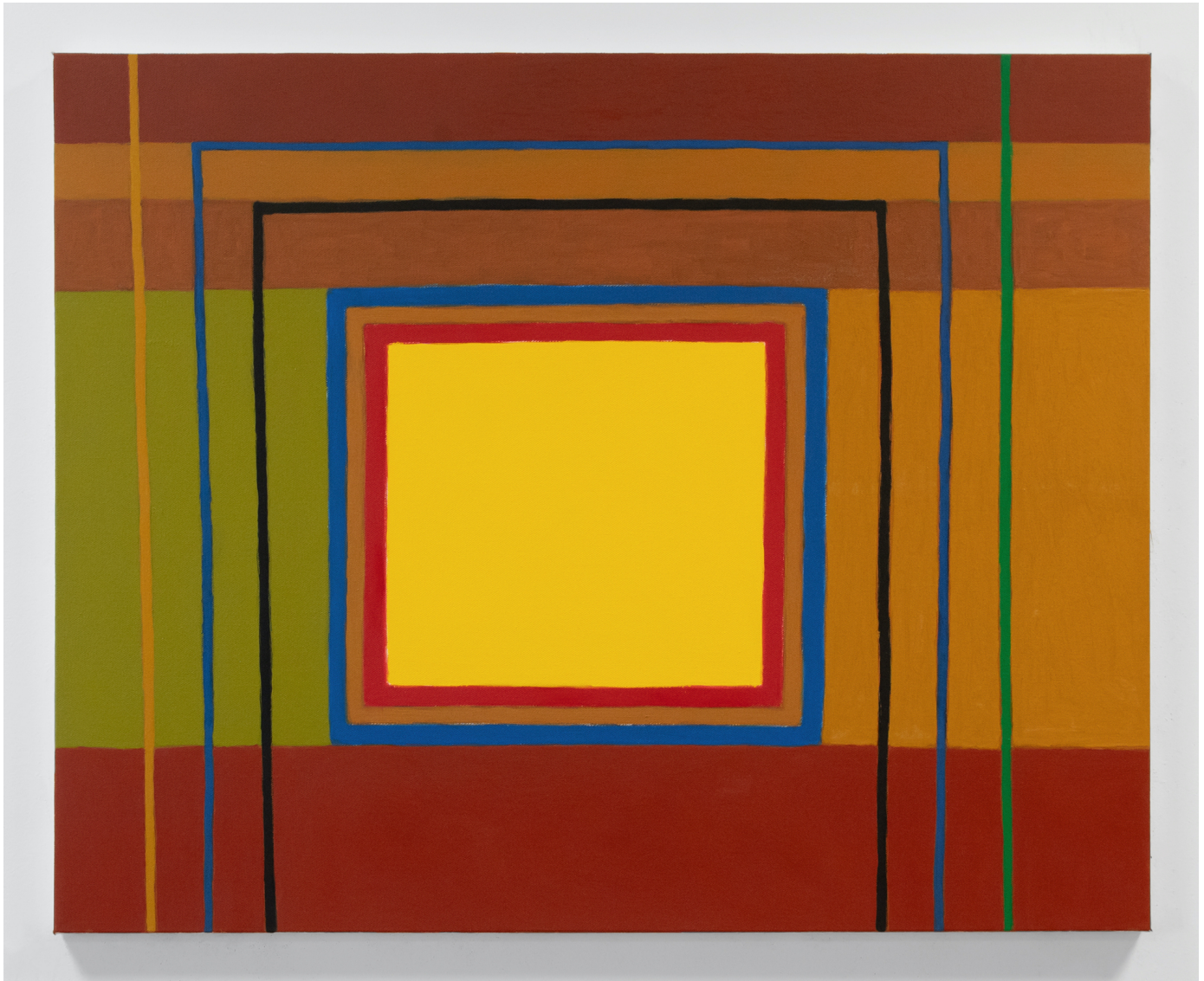
Art **Reviews**

Harriet Korman's Nonchalant Rigor

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John Yau February 11, 2024



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

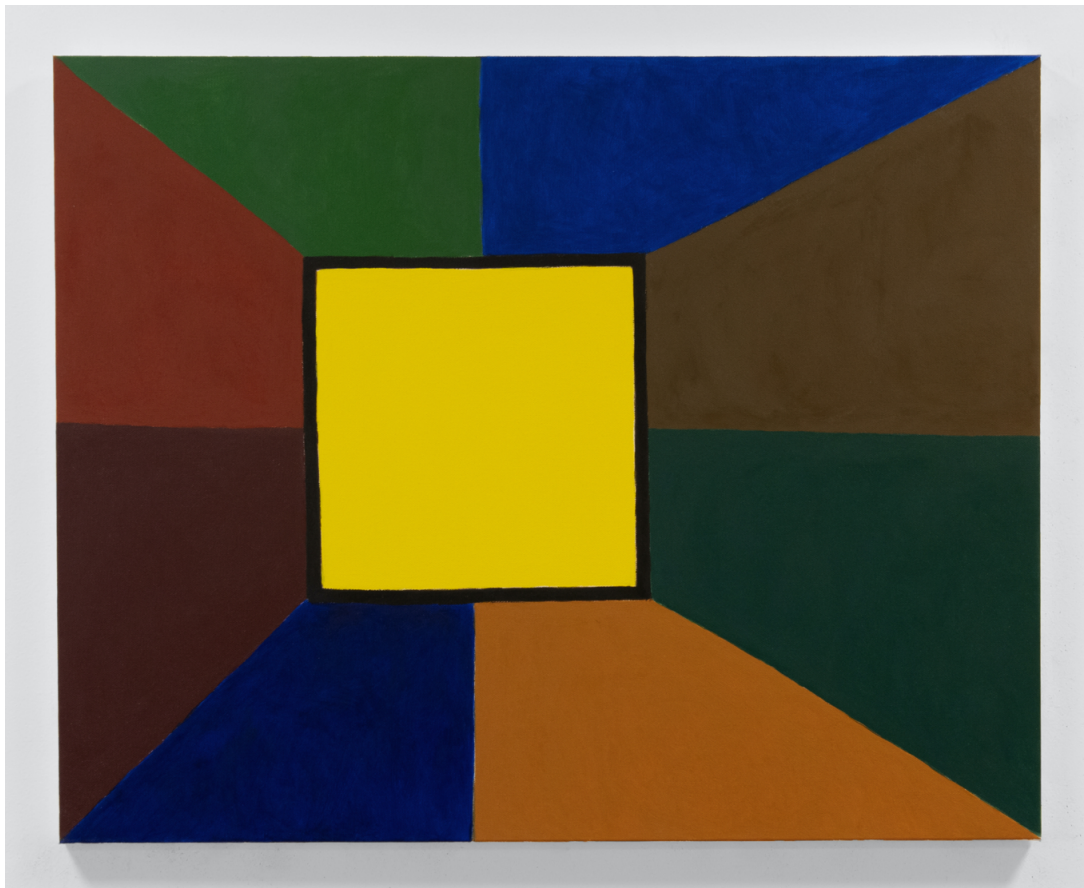
Harriet Korman's paintings are simultaneously rigorous and nonchalant. Her palette is unlike anyone else's. The 10 oil paintings in her current exhibition, *Portraits of Squares* at Thomas Erben Gallery, all dated 2022 or '23 and measuring 24 by 30 inches, are dominated by different hues of brown, along 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.



Harriet Korman, “Untitled” (2023), oil on canvas 24 x 30 inches

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.



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2023), oil on canvas 24 x 30 inches



Installation view of *Harriet Korman: Portraits of Squares* at Thomas Erben Gallery, New York FERNANDO SANDOVAL



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2023), oil on canvas 24 x 30 inches

Harriet Korman: Portraits of Squares continues at Thomas Erben Gallery (526 West 26th Street, floor 4, Chelsea, Manhattan) through March 2. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.