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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.

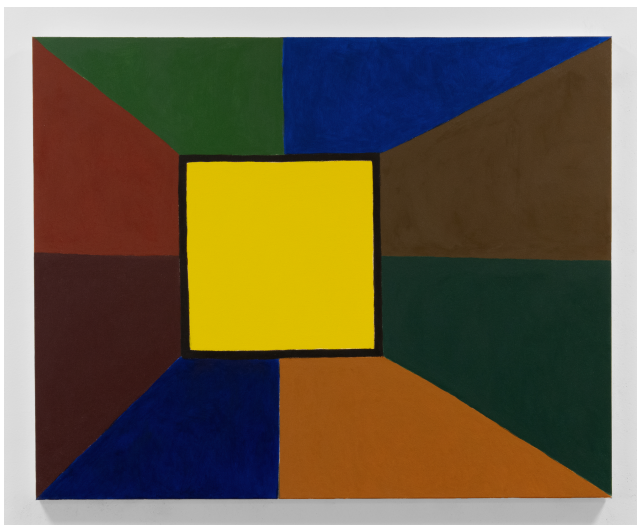
The square is indeed the central figure of the ten new untitled paintings in the show, all from 2022-23 and all 24" x 30", but it is unexpectedly set in the changing landscape of a horizontal format. As in a typical portrait gallery, installed at such a height as to face the viewer and stare back at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

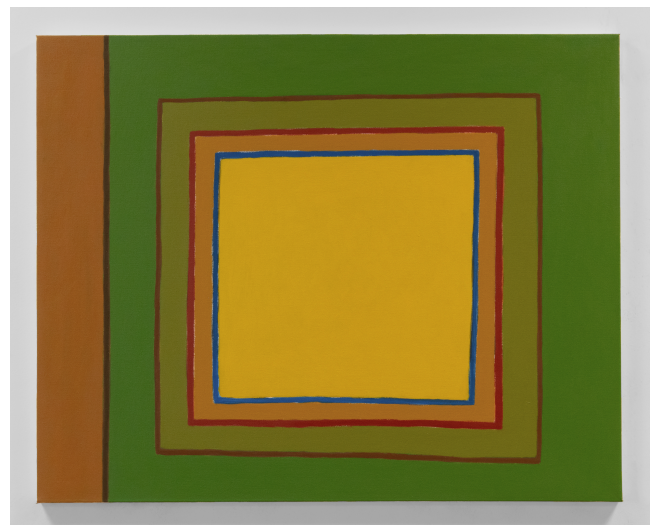
These are meta-geometric paintings referencing the epistemic figure of Modernism but "portrayed" here with all the imperfections and the individual humanity conveyed by traditional portraiture. Loosely hand-drawn, instead of being straightforwardly geometric, they forfeit any notion of mastery and control. 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)



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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.