

ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

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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

About the Writer: Saul Ostrow is an independent curator and critic. Since 1985, he has organized over 80 exhibitions in the US and abroad. His writings have appeared in art magazines, journals, catalogues, and books in the USA and Europe. In 2010, he founded along with David Goodman and Edouard Prulehiere, the not-for-profit Critical Practices Inc. as a platform for critical conversation and cultural practices. His book *Formal Matters* (selected and revised) published by Elective Affinities will be launched Fall, 2022. He served as Art Editor at Bomb Magazine, Co-Editor of Lusitania Press (1996-

2004) and as Editor of the book series Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture (1996-2006) published by Routledge, London.

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