

ARTS REVIEW

# At the Galleries

by Karen Wilkin

Arts Review from the  
Winter 2021 issue.





Farther uptown and farther west, Chelsea galleries came back to life with (relatively) heavily attended shows, despite requirements for appointments and other restrictions. Among the most satisfying of the fall offerings was “[Harriet Korman: Notes on Painting 1969–2019](#),” a mini-retrospective at Thomas Erben Gallery. The selection, made by the artist, followed her evolution over the past half century. Since each work represented an entire family of related paintings, the narrative was, of necessity, discontinuous; the initial impression was of variety: pale, cerebral canvases; disjointed grids; overscaled patchworks of saturated hues; stripes; stutters; and defiant compositions unlike any of the above. “If you want to understand painting,” Korman says in a [video](#) on the gallery website, “you have to try a lot of things.” But, she adds, there is a common thread, if you look for it. At its simplest level, that thread was Korman’s constant acknowledgement of the canvas as a flat, confrontational expanse that could be brought to life in many different ways. She sometimes deduced structure from the givens of the support, in works divided into quadrants, such as a 2016 example, with each quadrant generating a nest of concentric bands, no two alike, or works from 1971 diagramming the dimensions of the support with overlays, scraping, or tidy rows of stripes. In a vertical canvas from 1977, nested bands, reaching top to bottom, kicked out in the middle, broadening until the distinction between figure and ground became irrelevant.









Grids were implicit in many works, disrupted or knocked out of whack, as in the “background” of a 1983 painting where slapdash red and green crosshatches surrounded a tilted, roughly brushed, fat band of off-black, crossing a vertical column whose many hues were cancelled by loose purple scribbles. Black grids, confined to brown compartments forming an oversized grid, frayed into disconnected lines in a 1991 painting. And more. Korman seemed determined to assert the fact of the canvas, freely or loosely, by reminding us of its verticality and horizontality, and refusing to violate its flatness with illusionism, no matter how energetically her colors responded to each other. It was also clear that Korman dislikes repeating herself, no matter how fruitful a given approach may have been. “When people say there’s no more that can be done in painting,” Korman says, “that’s when the fun begins.” Her fun has dramatically serious results.





