

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

Harriet Korman's Formal Mastery

Being a torch carrier wasn't Korman's thing.



John Yau

November 18, 2018

162 Shares



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2015), oil on canvas, 30 × 40 inches (all images courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery)

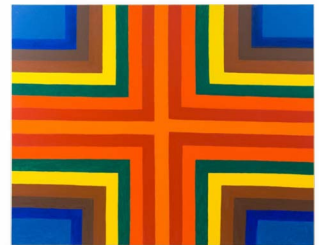
Harriet Korman began exhibiting her abstract paintings in 1971, during Conceptual Art's ascendancy and when many in the art establishment considered painting to be a casualty of history's progress.

Working in the wake of Minimalism, Color Field painting, shaped paintings, and painting-as-object, Korman rejected the argument Donald Judd put

forth[in]his influential essay, "Specific Objects" (1965): "The main thing wrong with painting is that it is a rectangular plane placed flat against the wall. A rectangle is a shape itself; it is obviously the whole shape; it determines and limits the arrangement of whatever is on or inside of it." Instead of seeing this as a limitation, Korman embraced painting's legacy as a challenge.

At the same time, over the course of a career that has spanned nearly 50 years, Korman has never developed a signature style, motif, or process; she has never become part of a movement or been associated with a particular

group. Nor has she looked back — like some in her generation — and become a revivalist of early American Modernism, aligning herself with such artists as Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, or Albert Pinkham Ryder. Being a torch carrier wasn't her thing.



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2016), oil on canvas, 48 × 60 inches

What can be said with certainty is that Korman has periodically contemplated such formal issues as the division of a painting's

surface, while the art world has shifted its attention to an emphasis on content. And yet, even if formalism has been a recurring feature of Korman's work, no single group of paintings typifies it. Where Judd saw limitations, Korman finds freedom. The fact that she has found this freedom without developing a signature style or abandoning painting and the rectangle is a rather remarkable achievement that has never received the attention it warrants.

While the death of painting — as a model of looking at and thinking about art — has been refuted, those who propagated it have never really reexamined their original position, preferring either to ignore painting or act as if the construction of their canon needs only some minor tinkering — a bit more inclusivity here, a few cosmetic touches there. These are some of the reasons why Korman has never gotten what she has long deserved: a comprehensive overview of her paintings and drawings initiated by a mainstream

initiated by a mainstream institution.



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2015), oil on canvas, 30 × 40 inches

So this is a call out to those who profess to care about art and perhaps can do something to change what I believe is a gross injustice: Go see the exhibition, *Harriet Korman, Permeable/Resistant: Recent Paintings and Drawings*, at Thomas Erben Gallery (November 1–December 21, 2018).

The exhibition consists of 11 oil paintings and four oilstick drawings, all of which share the same format — a centrally placed cross of colored lines that divides the painting's rectangular surface into four sets of L-shaped bands and solidly colored rectangles locked into the composition's four corners.

The four drawings are dated 2015, while the 11 paintings are dated between 2015 and

2018. All the works are untitled. While the drawings were all done on sheets measuring 12 by 16 inches, the paintings come in three different sizes: 30 by 40 inches, 40 by 52 inches, and 48 by 60 inches. Korman selects a specific drawing to establish the color pattern of a painting and the width of its bands, but the change in the medium, size, and ratio of height to width results in very different works. In this regard, the drawings are not blueprints for the paintings.



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2015), oilstick on paper, 12 × 16 inches

Drawing is central to Korman's work. For years she has adhered to two simple rules: she does not use a ruler or other mechanical aid to make her lines, and the color is never mixed, coming from either the tube or in stick form.

What strikes me about the simple division (a cross dividing the horizontal

rectangle into four equal sections) she establishes in these drawings is how much she does with it. Her approach can be read as a refutation of the mechanical side of the Minimalism (the use of masking tape, hard edges, and the cool, uninflected application of paint to signal the removal of the hand). Many artists used these devices to push their works towards the purely optical.

Korman, on the other hand, pushes toward the optical without resorting to the mechanical or removing all signs of the hand. She wants the making of the work to be visible, but without emphasizing the hand, as many of the gestural Abstract Expressionists did. Her use of compositional divisions to structure the color can be seen as a rejection of certain aspects of Color Field painting. For Korman, control and improvisation are two sides of the same coin. In these works, she updates Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square* series, reminding us that there is no such thing as the last word or the last

painting, at least while civilization continues to exist.

The challenge presented by the simple division of a larger rectangle into four smaller rectangles, whose individual shapes echo the overall shape, is what Korman focuses on in these drawings and the paintings that came after them. What could easily become mechanical and repetitive never does. This is one of the delights of the exhibition. The parameters she uses to launch the drawings never become formulaic.



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2016), oil on canvas, 40 × 52 inches

In one drawing, she uses purple vertical and horizontal lines to make the central cross, which she flanks with substantially wider orange bands, which are in turn edged in dark blue. There is a tension between the blue-edged, orange cross and the four

orange cross and the four small rectangles it tucks into the drawing's four corners. Each bordered by multiple, differently colored L-shaped bands. Against the dark blue edging and purple cross, the orange advances, pulling the edging and cross with it and becoming a form that is distinct.

Conversely, the rectangles tucked into the four corners become focal points pulling our attention away from the cross-like form dividing the sheet into quadrants. Looking becomes an act of reconfiguring, of shifting between figure and ground.

Korman further complicates this tension by doing something unexpected, changing the order of the colored bands embracing the four corners. A rectangle in one corner might be a different color than the other three. She might place closely related hues adjacent to each other, and edge them with contrasting colors.

There is a musical current flowing through these paintings; they convey a mesmerizing, staccato pulse. While certain colors

reappear — deep blue and royal purple, for example — Korman seems to have no particular palette that she relies on. Between 2015, when she started this group, and 2018, when she completed it, the palette grows richer and more cacophonous. Korman has become ever more masterful in her structuring of color. It is time we honor that achievement.

Harriet Korman,
Permeable/Resistant: Recent
Paintings and Drawings
continues at Thomas Erben
Gallery (526 West 26th
Street, 4th floor, Chelsea,
Manhattan) through
December 21.
