

HYPERALLERGIC

Art **Reviews**

The Deeply Satisfying Pleasures of Harriet Korman's Paintings

Walter Pater famously said, "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." Korman's paintings exist in a musical state.



by John Yau
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Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2021), oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches (all images courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery, photos by Andreas Vesterlund)

You don't need to use a lot of colors to be a great colorist. This became obvious when I saw the exhibition *Harriet Korman: New Work* at Thomas Erben Gallery (February 24–April 9, 2022), her fourth with the gallery. To further define the singularity of Korman's achievement, in contrast to many other abstract artists of her generation (she was born in the 1940s) who have been in pursuit of color, she does not nod to pop culture in her color choices, nor does she have a signature structure into which she drops her hues. Rather, she works in distinct series without any ostensible subject matter. As a consequence, she has not developed either a signature style or palette, those conventional access points the art world seems to crave. She wants the viewer to have a more direct and open encounter with her work, which is a seldom-traveled road these days.

As Korman states in the gallery press release:

In this current series, I drew to find a form I wanted to work with. These drawings are not studies, I consider drawing to be an equal practice to painting and value them as such. While drawing, I chose a very simple, familiar form of concentric rectangles because it seemed like it would be an interesting challenge. I took that form into painting without referring to the drawings, and later used the drawings as sources for the paintings.

Later, she adds:

I try to capture the dynamic in the drawings; the color relationships, the proportions, the movement — what attracts me in the drawing, not copy it. This interpolation has many obstacles, pitfalls, inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies, but ultimately is very engaging.



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2019), oil stick on paper, 12 x 16 inches

Korman's interest in proportion and movement are key to the dynamic relationships that she articulates in the recent paintings. While the paintings share the formal element of concentric rectangles there is nothing formulaic about what she does; each painting comes across as distinct, hard earned, and, at times, it seems almost rudimentary.

Many artists who explore color and geometry produce variations on a form or a palette, but this is never the case with Korman. You might think that she would settle into habits but she never does. I cannot stress how fresh and exciting this is. For one thing, each painting comes across as individual and specific, rather than as a variation on a pre-established form or another fill-in-the-colors version of geometric abstraction. By designating each work as "untitled," she shortens the distance between the viewer and the art by avoiding any detours through language and its attendant associations.

The freshness of these paintings is a result of Korman starting with oil stick drawings, which are meant to stand on their own, and do. In the drawings, she proceeds improvisationally: each color rectangle and the space it takes up determines what happens next. The width of the framing rectangles is markedly different and follows no pattern. The drawings work incrementally, in a process of adding without erasing or covering over one color with another that has its roots in Jackson Pollock and his poured paintings.

Each drawing becomes a possible structure to explore. The shift from oil stick drawing to oil painting, as well as the change in scale, evokes the legendary jazz pianist Art Tatum improvising Vincent Youmans's "Tea for Two." While respecting the original song, he makes it into something all his own. When the drawings and paintings are in close proximity, it becomes apparent how much Korman has transformed one thing into another, always while respecting the nature of her materials, the porous density of the oil stick, and the smooth solidity of the oil paint.



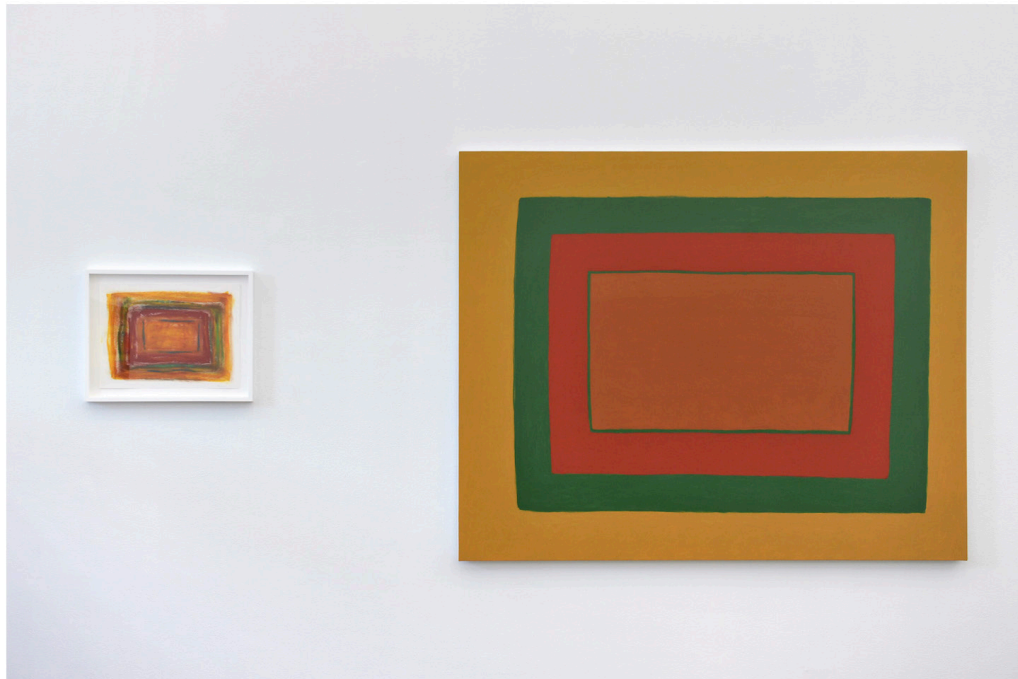
Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2019), oil on canvas, 24 x 36 inches

At the same time, there are a number of artists working this way — in which color calls to color — but I can't think of anyone as sensitive to the internal dynamics of proportion and density, and of the weight of one color against another, as Korman. These concerns, and her ability to trust her decisions without going back into the work, as if a perfect resolution existed, are why these paintings never become formulaic. Look at the ones on the gallery's longest wall and you will see that the proportions within the paintings' rectangles change and she does not work on an equally sized format: she is not programming her work according to consumers' desire for dependability. In recent years Korman has

worked with saturated colors, so her use of browns and chartreuse signal something new in her work. In the case of brown, she uses it as a neutral (neither warm nor cool), causing the other colors to gain in strength, or places two different tones in close proximity.

In fact, while I was scrutinizing the paintings, both up close and from a distance, I realized that I kept doing something that I rarely do in an exhibition. I repeatedly stood back and gazed at a group of paintings, seeing what they shared and what distinguished them, and taking particular notice of how the density of the colors changed from work to work. It is so easy to overlook this crucial difference between Korman's art and that of other artists who, for example, work within a grid structure.

Korman's geometric abstractions make those of other artists seem flabby. With many geometric abstract artists the similarities among their paintings far outweigh the differences. That this never happens with Korman's paintings should clue you into what is remarkable about them — for which she should receive more recognition. Each painting possesses a quietly unique identity.



Installation view of *Harriet Korman: New Work* at Thomas Erben Gallery. Left: "Untitled" (2019), oil stick on paper, 12 x 16 inches. Right: "Untitled" (2021), oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches

When she uses two yellows in a painting, as in "Untitled" (2021, oil on canvas, 48 by 60 inches), they are not the same, but it's the colors between them, and the width of each separating band, that makes their difference visually momentous. Walter Pater famously said, "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." Korman's paintings exist in a musical state; they compose an intuitively orchestrated set of optical vibrations that synthesize contrast and tonal shifts, large and small intervals, by underscoring difference.

She brings together different clusters and tones, some sharply contrasting and other tonally shifting. Sometimes the interval between related tones is marked by contrasting colors.

And even within the internal configuration Korman will do something unexpected, such as frame the contrasting color with a wide and a very narrow band. The overall effect is that a viewer is continuously pulled into the paintings, and will begin to notice the internal harmonies and dissonances, and how they fit together without becoming subsumed into an overarching pattern.

At one point, I limited my focus to the edges of the concentric rectangle, and how some were curved, which made the concentric planes appear as if they were billowing. Then I began accounting for all that was not a concentric rectangle: a floating, diagonal, yellow-orange brushstroke within the deep orange rectangle in the center of the painting, a brown line within the narrow, red, centered lozenge-like rectangle.

We are not meant to see Korman's paintings all at once. The kind of looking her paintings and drawings demand, and should receive, is slow. As we become more attuned to her decisions, we may realize that we cannot ascribe any other motivation than the pursuit of a unique color sensation. It is a harder goal to achieve than one might think, and Korman is one of the few who has never made a signature form, or developed a market-driven aesthetic, within that domain.

Harriet Korman: New Work continues at *Thomas Erben Gallery (526 West 26th Street, floor 4, Chelsea, Manhattan)* through April 9. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.