

Harriet Korman: *Permeable/Resistant*

by Raphael Rubinstein

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When asked how she starts one of her recent quadrant-based paintings, Harriet Korman replies that her first step is to “find the center.” She does so without the assistance of any measuring device, relying solely on her hand and eye to determine the point from which she will begin building out her right-angled bands of color. This doesn’t mean that the entire composition is improvised: each painting is closely based on a 12 by 16 inch oilstick drawing in which Korman has already worked out the number of bands and the sequence of their colors. Not all of the eleven paintings in this show were accompanied by a corresponding drawing, but in the four cases where the preliminary sketch was present, it was clear that the artist had carefully followed the drawing.



Ms. Harriet Korman, *Untitled*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 40 × 52 inches. Courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery.

And yet, the translation from oilstick on paper to oil on canvas results in a total transformation. Understanding exactly why the paintings are so different from the drawings may help us to grasp something crucial about Korman’s work. Obviously, the materials have a lot to do with this, as does the scale (the paintings range between 30 by 40 and 48 by 60 inches). We respond to the physicality of oil paint and canvas—its surface subtleties, its chromatic richness, its historical associations—differently than we do to a drawing. We also have different expectations regarding notions of labor and finish.

At first glance, Korman’s paintings look like they belong to the realm of strict modular abstraction in which every color unit has been precisely placed and formed. It only takes a few more seconds of viewing to see how deeply this isn’t the case. The geometry in Korman’s paintings never lines up exactly. What seems like perfect modularity turns out to be unabashed irregularity: edges waver,

bands taper and swell, shapes that by the logic of the composition should be of equal size are found not to be so. The geometry of these paintings is emphatically handmade, and the longer you look at them, the more handmade they reveal themselves to be. The painting history she belongs to runs from Paul Klee to Mary Heilmann, rather than from Anni Albers to early Frank Stella. There's also a strong connection to the realm of textiles. Korman's concentric geometry can recall the "Housetop" quilts of Gee's Bend (like Martha Jane Pettway's "*Housetop*"—nine-block "*Half-Log Cabin*" *Variation* corduroy quilt from circa 1945 in the Souls Grown Deep collection) as well as weavings by Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Albers.



Ms. Harriet Korman, *Untitled*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 40 × 52 inches. Courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery.

When she sticks to the same colors for the bands in all four corners of a painting, the effect is very different from the canvases where each quadrant features a different sequence of colors. In the latter case, the cruciform symmetry breaks apart dramatically. A single canvas begins to look like a cropped view of the abutting corners of four different paintings and it becomes difficult to resolve the composition into a single image. In one painting Korman breaks the symmetry still further by introducing a diagonal color division into the upper left quadrant.

Writing in *Artforum* in 1975, Roberta Smith observed that Korman's "second show is good, one of this year's best in its own modest, youthful way. Korman's paintings are very simple. What's amazing about them is not that she does so much with so little but that she does much with so little with such nonchalance. And the nonchalance isn't a negative quality, because the results aren't sloppy or insubstantial." The austerity Smith noted ("so much with so little") vanished from Korman's work long ago, but the nonchalance is still evident.

The implications of artistic nonchalance are worth teasing out. Although usually contrasted with highly finished, rigidly executed work, the particular kind of casual approach Korman employs really has nothing to do with degrees of finish. Rather, her willingness to let the painting find its own equilibrium is an expression of a philosophy that posits an underlying natural order, a universal harmony. It's the same thing you see in African figurative sculptures that embrace asymmetry and accept irregularities in the wood, and the same thing that Lao Tzu expressed in the *Tao Te Ching* when he wrote (as John C.H. Wu's translation has it), "He who fusses over anything ruins it" and "The greatest straightness looks like crookedness."

You can only make paintings like Korman's if you have faith that you can channel visual verities greater than your own individual style. It's also generally true that you can only make paintings like this if you've been at it for a long time. I don't know if Korman will continue with this quadrant format (I, for one, certainly hope so), but the approach seems so full of potential that the paintings in this show, fantastic as they are, feel like just the beginning.

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