



AT THE GALLERIES

By Karen Wilkin | Arts Review



IMPRESSIVE EXHIBITIONS BY WOMEN WERE CONSPICUOUS this past season, ranging from intimate records of close observation to explorations of not-quite Euclidian geometry, from playfully updated history paintings to an elegiac, multi-screen video installation, and an

improvisation on a celebrated Old Master prototype. There were memorable shows by male artists, as well, although in today's climate, it may be dangerous to say so. A distinguished curator at a major museum lost his job a few years ago when he stated the presumably neutral fact that the institution was not going to stop collecting the work of white males. But about the women: the title of Harriet Korman's "Portraits of Squares," at Thomas Erben Gallery in Chelsea, was as deceptive as the works themselves. Rather than precisely geometric, crisply symmetrical paintings, as we might have expected, we discovered personable, rectangular canvases that rang changes on surprising arrangements of slightly off-kilter squares. Korman has explored the possibilities of grids for some time, but she has always allowed irregularities of free-hand drawing to enrich her work. "Portraits of Squares" was no exception. Surrounded by bands of varying width or by wedges, sometimes outlined with a sure but not infallible hand, the eponymous squares could be more or less centered on the modestly sized rectangular canvases, but often drifted to the sides, creating lively imbalances. The squares changed sizes and, on occasion, were subdivided into facets that momentarily suggested three dimensions. Each painting was structured differently, now minimally subdivided, now with multiple components, consistently disrupting our expectations. Korman is a remarkable colorist who orchestrates complex relationships of unnamable hues. "Portraits of Squares" was dominated by warm, saturated, often earthy colors, offset by intense blues, yellow, and an unexpected pink. Perhaps because of the prevalent ochres, off browns, and tawny intermediaries, the palette had Renaissance overtones—not the chalky chroma of frescos, but the lush hues of Venetian aristocrats' costumes. The longer we spent with Korman's seemingly straightforward, restrained, geometric paintings, the more complex they became. Rather than being the easily understood presentations of familiar geometry suggested by "Portraits of Squares," they offered a lot to look at and think about. Korman has said that she had wanted to make these paintings for decades. How fortunate that she finally did.