

Rico Gatson: *Above and Below*

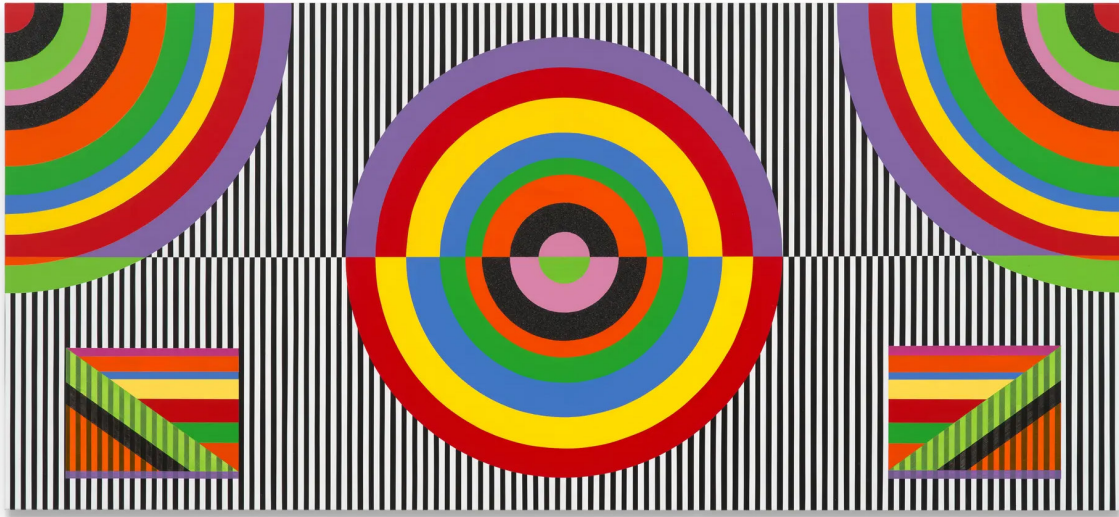
9 October 2024 | By David Ebony

In his landmark book *The Power of the Center* (1982), art and culture theorist Rudolf Arnheim notes that, “Throughout the ages and in most cultures, the central position has been used to give perceivable expression to the divine or some other exalted power. The god, the saint, the monarch dwells above the pushes and pulls of the milling throng ... outside the dimension of time, immobile, unshakable.” There is a palpable centrifugal force in the works in *Above and Below*, Rico Gatson’s exhibition of sixteen abstract paintings, all from 2024. These colorful, hard-edge compositions of stripes, circular forms, triangles, and other geometric shapes generate a pulsating energy generally emanating from the center. They are painted with acrylic on hollow-core wood doors, suggestive of portals to some other spatial and spiritual realm. Some of the compositions seem centripetal, such as *Untitled (Travelers)*, while others do not depend on an insistent inward or outward movement, including *Untitled (Four Vibrations)* and *Untitled (Afro-Utopia I)*. These compositions appear more static and emblematic, in the manner of a flag or a political banner.



Installation view: *Rico Gatson: Above and Below* at Miles McEnery Gallery, 2024. Courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY.
Photo: Christopher Burke Studio.

In certain works, such as *Untitled (Target/Targeted)*, and *Untitled (Mother Star)*, a large circular shape holds the exalted central position. In the former, the commanding disc with many evenly spaced bands of color recalls Jasper Johns’s “Targets,” or one of Kenneth Noland’s “Concentric Circle” series from the early 1960s. Gatson’s “target,” however, lacks the deadpan irony of Johns’s proto-Pop works. And, set against a rather aggressive pattern of thin horizontal and vertical stripes, and its palette—featuring the Pan-African colors of red, green, and black (enhanced with touches of glitter), plus those of the rainbow flag—harbor veiled socio-political content that is quite far removed from Noland’s pioneering Color Field experiments.



Rico Gatson, *Untitled (Above/Below)*, 2024, Acrylic paint and glitter on wood, 36 x 80 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York.

Some of Gatson's works conjure an Op Art vibe, but without the formulaic trickery associated with that genre. The exhibition's title piece, *Untitled (Above/Below)*, one of the most riveting works in the show, is a bifurcated, horizontal composition full of mesmerizing optical effects. Here, a circle dominating the center is made of seven evenly spaced bands of color arranged against a backdrop of thin, vertical, black-and-white stripes. The background stripes, as well as the circular bands of color in the central form, are discontinuous from top to bottom of the composition, resulting in an unnerving visual conundrum that is ultimately captivating and hypnotic. *Untitled (After the Storm)* is similarly potent, with its orb of multicolored bands with a black bullseye rising above diagonal networks of red and black jagged shapes on either side that hint at scorching lightning bolts.

A centrifugal force is discernible even in the compositions without circular forms, as in *Untitled (In the Midst I)*, in which a royal purple V shape rules the center of the composition of tightly packed, narrow triangular forms. The centrifugal nature of this composition arises from the hot colors (the yellow and orange "Ns") on either end of the canvas that push forward as the cool purple recedes. Despite its modest scale, this work has a monumental feel and, in some ways, evokes the public mural projects by William T. Williams and the Smokehouse Associates in the late 1960s. The works in *Above and Below*, in fact, follow Gatson's own successful public art projects. His "Beacon" series of posters and mosaic murals for New York's MTA and elsewhere, begun in 2018, also feature intensely centralized compositions. These works were made in homage to some of his African American and Latino cultural heroes—artists, writers, musicians, and sports figures—including Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, Sonia Sotomayor, and Reggie Jackson. A centralized photo-based image of each subject radiates long bands of narrow triangular shapes, often in the Pan-African colors of red, black and green, and others in orange and white like rays of sunlight. And this past summer, Gatson's *Untitled (Collective Light Transfer)*, murals and columns temporarily installed in Penn Station, filled with colorful, hard-edge geometric shapes, underscored the raw energy of one of New York's most dynamic and vital transportation hubs. In these endeavors, and in the works in the gallery exhibition, Gatson uses the centrifugal motif metaphorically as an exalted power, in Arnheim's terms, suggestive of a unifying force that could counter societal divisiveness and political strife.

David Ebony is a contributing editor of *Art in America*. He is also the author of monthly columns for Yale University Press online, and Artnet News.