

HYPERALLERGIC

Marilyn Lerner's Random and Deliberate Geometries

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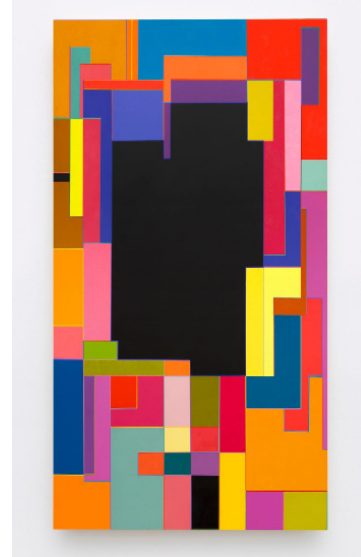
As someone who has been following Marilyn Lerner's work since 1989, I have long thought of her as an outlier whose inspirations include Hilma af Klint, gameboards, tantric art, and her trips to Turkey, Africa, and Southeast Asia during the 1970s and '80s. While her work shares something with two other underrated painters of cross-cultural hybrids, Simon Gouverneur and Stephen Mueller, Lerner is less overt than they are about her relationship to mystical signs and symbols. Her preoccupation is with color and the optical frisson she can attain through her intuitive use of geometric organization.

In her current exhibition, "Marilyn Lerner: Walking Backward Running Forward", at Kate Werble Gallery (September 4 – October 5, 2018), her first solo show there, the artist showed 14 paintings, five from 1988-89 and nine from 2016-18. In the works from the 1980s, Lerner articulated precisely edged geometric forms on solid grounds that were either black or white. In some she used modeling paste to build up exact geometric forms. The formats included a notched circle, a vertical rectangle that doubled as a bas-relief with raised and sunken sections, and idiosyncratic geometric shapes. The vocabulary consisted of triangles, circles, and squares.

Lerner's late '80s works also share a connection with the paintings of two geometric artists: Charmion von Wiegand and George Ortman. These painters, who have always been seen on the periphery of major movements, are in their own way innovators in pursuit of something that stands apart from mainstream art. Like them, Lerner is not a purist and her use of geometry was not driven by purely formal concerns. This leads me to suggest another link, which is the late work of Wassily Kandinsky, who believed that "music is the ultimate teacher." For these artists, geometry is not simply about dividing the surface of the painting. I mention these connections, however tenuous they might be, because I think it is important to place Lerner's work within a context, and especially because the recent work is unlike anything else being done. No one has ever come close to making geometric paintings like Lerner.

The connection between the two groups of works on display, done 30 years apart, can be seen in two paintings, "Eight Circles" (1989) and "Walking Backward Running Forward" (2018). They are both done on the same format of a notched circular wood panel. It is clear that Lerner was looking at the earlier painting when she began working on "Walking Backward Running Forward." Compositionally, they are exactly the same – a geometric riff on Robert Rauschenberg's "Factum I" and "Factum II (both 1957) – with the difference between them residing in the colors of the eight circles, which are set against a white ground.

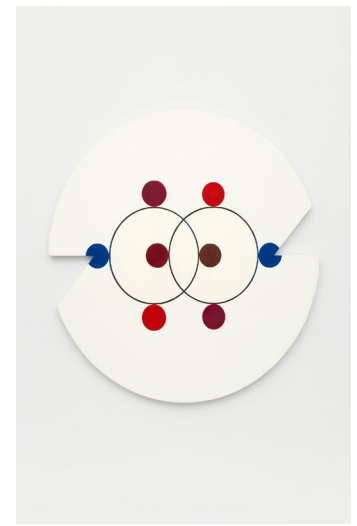
As pendants, the pair becomes a meditation on time passing. In both paintings, two central circles overlap like a Venn diagram. Eight smaller, solidly colored circles border their circumferences, four to a circle. Due to the Venn-



Marilyn Lerner, "Black Center" (2017), oil on wood, 40 X 26 inches (all images courtesy Kate Werble Gallery)

like overlap, one small, colored circle in each group of four maintains a dual function, as both the center point of one larger circle and a border element on the other.

Lerner further complicates this optical configuration by cutting a triangular notch on either side of the painting, at points corresponding to its diameter. The notches cut into the circumferences of the outermost colored circles (which are blue in the 1989 version and purple in the one from this year), so that they function on two levels as well, invading both the painting as a physical object and in the circle as a painted shape. By virtually duplicating “Eight Circles” with “Walking Backward Running Forward,” Lerner establishes a series of echoes that hold our attention as well as add a note of mystery to our experience. Given the spread of time between the two paintings, time seems to have passed and not passed.



Marilyn Lerner, “Eight Circles” (1989), oil on wood, diameter 36 inches

Despite the deliberate matching of “Eight Circles” and “Walking Backward Running Forward,” the two groups of work evidence a major change that has taken place in Lerner’s use of color, which has become brighter and more jazzily dissonant. In “Black Center” (2017), a full spectrum of brightly colored, right-angled shapes (bars, rectangles, stepped and L-shaped forms) ayellows, for example – it is clear that nothing has come straight out of a tube; every pigment has been mixed.

The tension between the black center and the colors is relentless. While the choice of colors seems to follow no order, the wedged-in rectangles and L-shapes anchor each corner of the painting. Some of the shapes are edged with a contrasting color, imbuing it with an optical halo. The shapes seem both tightly fitted together and, in places, overlapping.

The contrasting colors and haloes make it easy to imagine that we are looking at planes of spectral light. It is this light that is particular to Lerner’s paintings. The linear haloes, which can change color as they travel around a form, heighten the forms they contain, as well as imbue the painting with an optical hum.

In “Second Sight” (2017), the eccentric shape of the wood panel support seems to have been derived from two different-sized rectangles partially sharing a single edge. The rectangle on the left is smaller than the one on the right and rises above it, giving the impression that the one on the right has slipped down. A black isosceles triangle outlined in khaki green, with its apex at the uppermost point of contact between the two panels, forms a kind of hinge between them.

The rest of the painting is mostly filled with triangles and trapezoids — angled shapes echoing the triangle — though Lerner has interspersed a few rectangles among them. As with “Black Center,” many of the shapes are edged with thin lines of another color. There seems to be no logic governing the placement of one color to another, but the adjacency does not feel arbitrary either. This is the paradox running through Lerner’s work: everything seems simultaneously deliberate and random. Again echoing “Black Center,” the black triangle anchors “Second Sight,” enabling the artist to move from color shape to color shape without becoming programmatic.

The myriad shapes and colors slow down our looking, as we keep reconfiguring them in our mind’s eye. The black center – whatever its shape — becomes more than a visual foil. It tugs at our attention and stirs up our emotions. Its blackness does not become a hole; rather than threatening us with the void, its presence instead offers us a comforting oasis amidst the hubbub of color.