

# Harriet Korman *Recent Paintings and Drawings*

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Since her first exhibition in Germany in 1970, when she was in her early twenties, Harriet Korman has been sectioning the canvas into distinct compartments. Initially, she did this by precisely spacing thin vertical bars across the surface, methodically divided by thinner horizontal ones. Later, she repeated brushstrokes that were boxed off, and juxtaposed. Since the mid-1990s, she has divided the canvas into a non-hierarchical mélange of geometric areas, each demarcated by a single color. The one constant throughout has been her assiduous rejection of naturalistic light, space, allusions, and illusions—anything that can be construed as a translation of reality. She is a pure abstract artist, one who doesn't rely on a visual hook, cultural association, or anything that smacks of essentialization or the spiritual. It is a position that few painters have taken, particularly if they began their career after the rise of Andy Warhol and entered an era dominated by image-makers, as Korman did. The key behind much of her painting is her drawing, which she has seldom shown, but which she uses as a kind of template. They enable her to establish the structure in which her improvisational choice of colors can begin. Her palette is dominated by primaries and secondaries, browns and violet-browns, and, in the largest painting in this exhibition, white and black. The tension between structure and improvisation, between something fixed and something made up, is central to her practice.

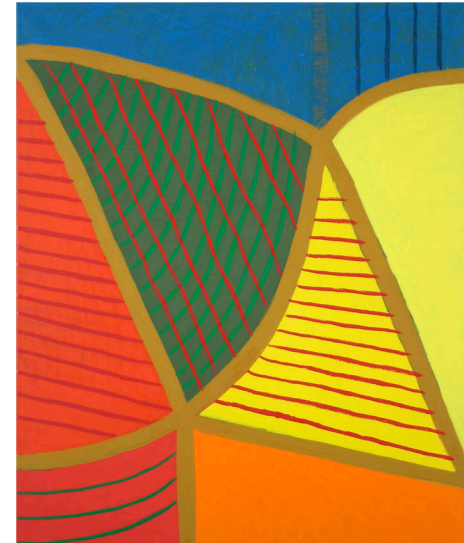
In her recent exhibition, which consists of five small black-and-white pastels and thirteen richly chromatic paintings that range in size from intimate to human, Korman brings the repeated lines and sections of flat color into close proximity. In some paintings, the lines are more awkwardly made than in others, where line and shape convey the same uninflected passage across the surface. At first glance, the combination of the directly made, slightly wavering line and the interlocking shapes of unmodulated color are discordant and even grating. It's as if she deliberately and perversely combined two different kinds of jigsaw puzzles into one, making it impossible for the viewer to find any sort of stability within the painting. But this instability is, I think, one of the real pleasures the paintings have to offer; it keeps us attentive and slightly

unsettled, which is a condition we usually inhabit with apprehension and wariness.

Korman's interlocking configurations of unstable shapes and twisting lines revisits the figure/ground relationship with a fresh eye. All the parts seem tightly bonded together, and yet some feel as if they could detach from the rest. Nothing in the paintings is quite at ease with itself. In the strongest works, the configurations keep changing, as they do in a kaleidoscope, with the mind organizing the parts one way and then another, unable to finally fix them into a secure and steady relationship. It is this nonstop animation of the surface that distinguishes her work from both her historical predecessors (Paul and Sonia Delaunay, Josef Albers, Auguste Herbin, and Richard Paul Lohse), as well as from her contemporaries. By conflating what we now call all-over abstraction with the figure/ground relationship (and consequently placing her paintings outside either category), Korman upends two distinct trajectories in postwar abstraction. It is no small accomplishment, and it declares that painting is still open and that the end has not been reached. One also senses her steadfast independence; she refuses to subject herself to an externally applied narrative regarding the proper thing to do in an abstract painting.

The collision of line and shape, where each functions independently and yet in slightly disharmonious concert with what is around it, is especially notable in two paintings based on the same drawing, which is also included in the exhibition. Except for one wavering vertical line dividing the rectangle into two more-or-less equal halves, the drawing is made up of curvilinear lines and arabesques of differing thicknesses. In one of the two paintings, which hang side by side, Korman focuses her attention on the interlocking shapes within the two divisions, while in the other she emphasizes a linear element, developing it into both a line zooming around the painting, like a balloon losing air, and a sinuous shape.

In the first painting, figure and ground have been placed in such close proximity that it is impossible to distinguish one from the other with any certainty. We notice where the yellow stops, interrupted by a blue shape, and where it continues, sensing that the two



Harriet Korman, *Untitled*, 2007, 36 x 30", oil on canvas

areas are both connected and distinct. At a meeting of dark and light greens, we wonder if the yellow touching both areas has anything to do with the change. And while we cannot align what our eyes see with what our mind knows in any comforting way, the instability seems of a piece with the way we live life; we would like to be sure, and we go about our lives as if everything will be okay, but we know that is not the case. In celebrating the pleasures of uncertainty within a pre-established structure, Korman seems to be suggesting that this is how we ought to live our lives as well as practice our art: be open to the vicissitudes, however small they might be, because they cannot be avoided. By repeating the same structuring of the plane, but coming up with a very different, slightly more discordant painting, as she does in the one in which the line becomes a shape and vice versa, she shows us that nothing stays the same, and that need not be a cause for alarm.

—John Yau