

Melissa Meyer *New Works*

Lennon, Weinberg Inc. February 12 – March 21, 2009 John Yau

When Stéphane Mallarmé said that everything exists to end up in a book, he didn't mean an art history book written by a university professor with an axe to grind. The ever-present attempt to herd all artists through an officially approved, ever narrowing funnel is largely the expression of an authoritarian desire. Posted over the funnel is the declaration that all-over painting led to repetition and sameness, the use of a grid or similar modular units, such as the stripe. Melissa Meyer's recent exhibition of nine new paintings and two works on paper—her best in years—offers a counter view; that all-overness led to difference, that it didn't squeeze out space or reduce mark making to a procedure that implied mechanical repetition. History is not a single story, but multiple stories, all of them in contention.

In the early 1970s, while Meyer was in her mid 20s, she and Miriam Schapiro coined the term "femmage" to advance the view that the origin of collage was women's work, quilting and patching together. However, unlike Schapiro, Meyer never became a Pattern and Decoration artist, and, more importantly, she never became literal about her sources or utilized them as ready-mades. She remained a painter for whom imagination was a viable means of transforming a range of sources into paint, initially as interlocking shapes, followed by lasso-like gestural shapes. In 2003, David Cohen characterized her "as virtually without a peer as a lyrical abstractionist." To her credit, she has moved beyond the lyrical into a realm that is disjunctive to the point of jarring—and enthralling—a merging that lifts her work to another level.

Between 2001 and 2003, three events occurred that enabled her to reinvent herself without losing touch with her roots in Abstract Expressionism. First, she began making watercolors. Second, she was commissioned to make two huge murals (one is forty feet high and the other is sixty feet long) for the Shiodome City Center in Tokyo. Third, she began to use

Photoshop as an aid in the composition of the murals. One direct consequence was Meyer's decision to thin her oil paint, bringing it closer to the consistency of ink and watercolor, which enabled her to apply the medium more rapidly and definitively than before. This also resulted in a more pronounced role for light and space in her work. Finally, and this is where I think the work has taken off, she began exploring the possibilities of discontinuity, which, in this exhibition, has become more cacophonous and turbulent than previously. The glyphs and underlying patches of color neither fit together nor add up. It's as if the glyphs are trying to become unmoored from any sense of security. I would like to offer Meyer, an artist who named her paintings after songs by Elvis Presley and The Rolling Stones, this musical analogy for her recent work: she has fused the ruptured, stutters of post-bebop to the atonal clusters of Morton Feldman and the computer-generated sounds of Charles Wuorinen. It's a grand collage that somehow manages not to reveal its seams thanks to Meyer's mastery of tonal shifts and coloristic contrasts and jumps.

In almost all of her recent work Meyer first creates a patchwork ground of different-sized rectangles: yellow, pink, and cantaloupe-colored. The yellows can be acidic and sharp, like a lemon, or luminous and warm, like a child's poster-paint sun. On these grounds Meyer stacks, jams, bleeds, and leaves, as if broken off, linear glyphs that hover between scribbles and crude geometries. Using different tonalities of red, green, and blue, as she does in many, but not all of the works, Meyer completes the spectrum, yet, at the same time, distinguishes the glyphs from each other, and from the ground.

All elbows and knees, the glyphs and colors either jostle or nestle together. In "Galvin" (2008), the largest of the nine paintings, the mostly blue and violet glyphs are crowded, like shoppers in an elevator during a storewide sale. No two of the glyphs are alike, with all of them feeling slightly larger or



Melissa Meyer, "Lester Series IV," 2007, 22-1/2 x 27", watercolor on paper.

smaller than their neighbors. Viewers have to keep refocusing their attention, which introduces a frenetic pace into the whole experience, suggesting that one needs to be hyperaware just to negotiate an ordinary situation. For anyone living in a city, this is something that has become second nature. Galvin reminded me of a fraught urban environment, but in a way that allowed me to step back and reflect upon its beauty.

In the two square, darker paintings, "Black Crow Blues and Not Dark Yet" (both 2009), Meyer uses a wider brush to apply deep blue, raven-like blue, and dark violet glyphs to the pale yellow ground, establishing a tension between the glyphs and the containing edge. It's as if they are trying to break free, even as they acknowledge the edges' constraints. At the same time, bluntly made and often sharply angled, the glyphs convey anger and frustration, as if softly rounded edges are no longer possible. The density of the color and the pressure of the brush amplify disjuncture, and the feeling that things don't add up. In "Lang" (2008), clusters of pale blue, red, and orange glyphs are layered over, and interrupted by intermittently placed, dark blue, linear shapes, which feel contorted and pent-up. Some unseen pressure has turned the lyrical back on itself. The edginess in these paintings is new; Meyer has moved into darker, more disquieting territory, and she has done so without bringing along all the things for which she has previously been praised. ■