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Harriet Korman

The Tremolo Effect: Harriet Korman at Lennon Weinberg
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<http://www.artcritical.com/2012/04/13/harriet-korman/>

April 13, 2012

artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

DEPARTMENTS - COVER STORY

Friday, April 13th, 2012



Harriet Korman, *Converge*, 2011. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy of Lennon, Weinberg, inc.

For more than three decades, Harriet Korman has been on a mission to strip her work down to its irreducible elements. The current exhibition of thirteen modestly-sized yet surprisingly monumental paintings finds her boiling away what little fat remained of her vision. Those familiar with her work might have thought there was not much left to do without, as her previous exhibition featured simple biomorphic shapes rendered in solid blocks of color sans shadow, overlap, or dimensionality. As it turns out, for Korman curved lines are expendable too.

Replacing the swooping forms of the preceding works is a series of triangles within grids of rectangles, with patterns and layouts resembling a child's first geometric coloring book. The resulting deadpan compositions work decisively to undermine the viewer's ability to project meaning—subjective or otherwise. In short, by deleting curves along with their subtle underlying hint of personality, Korman's paintings appear to a startling degree to be purely objective.

There is another curious element to these artworks that may at first elude notice, so infrequently is it a factor: they are 100% flat. In his famous 1955 essay "Modernist Painting", Clement Greenberg suggested that to move forward painting should eschew the traditional depiction of space in favor of embracing the reality of the essential flatness of the painting surface. Yet while this concept has found a secure place in the practice of art, it is hard to name abstract painters from Greenberg's time to ours whose paintings actually appear without any illusion of visual depth. Overwhelmingly, from Pollock's drips to Chris Martin's slavered brushwork, the perception of space, of foreground and background persists. Not so in Korman's work, which refuses to imply anything beyond the surface, adamantly inhabiting a single plane of existence.



Harriet Korman, *Convergence*, 2011. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy of Lennon, Weinberg, inc.

What remains? Denuded of meaningful subject, other than the painting itself, or of figure/ground relationship, or of any of the content available to traditional depictive strategies, Korman bets everything on the three things left: color, brushwork, and line. Color, naturally, starts off the conversation as it reaches out from the greatest distance. Indeed *Converge*, 2011, beckons convincingly all the way from the far back wall of the long floor-through gallery space. Like everything else in this body of work, Korman favors a simple, rather than simplistic, palette. Luminous variations of blues, reds, yellows, greens, and oranges predominate, rounded out with violets and tertiary red-browns. Each solid color, subtly fluctuating, is applied with a careful but not overly fussy touch. The oil is not strictly speaking a wash, but is thin enough to allow the ground to abet the painting's substantial glow. If one looks closely, one can discern the elegant yet matter of fact brushstrokes.

Once you get close to the brushwork, the sensitivity of Korman's minimal draftsmanship reveals itself. For whether the artist creates the under-drawing defining the shapes with a straightedge or not, it is clear that each tenuous border is painted without one – the color gently pulled to obey by Korman's hyperconscious hand. This tremolo effect, though barely perceptible, supplies the paintings with their undeniable warmth and humanity. So, although what remains is reductive in the extreme, there is material aplenty for deep meditation on what painting can achieve.