

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Works on paper are often considered more instinctively conceived and spontaneously executed than paintings. Abstract painter Julie Shapiro's mercurial current show—the images streaming, coming together, moving apart, advancing, retreating—the result of a year and half deeply engrossed in printmaking as well as experimenting with other media on paper, proves this point. Shapiro said that when she had put up some of the *Strata* prints she had been working on (vertically oriented, doubled fine meshes of blue, blue and red, blacks, with the paper glimmering through in places) next to her paintings, she was struck by how much more animated and direct they seemed. And indeed, they are less worked, more interrogative in mode, with an appealing, contingent delicacy. The layerings of color, the translucency alternating with opacity, while dense, rich, are absorbed into the paper and far less tactile than the overlays of paint that in some of Shapiro's previous works suggest low relief, the drizzled surfaces almost sculptural. The prints became a way for her to “break open” the work, she said, which is easier to do with works on paper. Paper, as another general observation, is less intimidating than canvas and with that greater sense of freedom comes discoveries.

The small to moderate-sized works in this exhibition include etchings, linocuts and compositions painted from a mix of acrylwash, gouache and acrylic that Shapiro found had greater depth and vibrancy of hue than each medium alone. Her aesthetic continues to be based on the perceptual, responsive to formal interactions of color, space, light, scale, weight and material. Small shifts signify in Shapiro's paintings and in the new works on paper, the marks are often separated, more clearly delineated, with intervals between them, the field visible. Her primary imagery remains a grid or stripes—which might be thought of as half grids—but after the *Strata* series are personalized, feminized, beguilingly curved. The softening of the geometry was partially due to drawing freehand, without a straightedge. Delicate, vulnerable and above all, candid, they possess an appealing freshness as decisions were made quickly in response to the process.

Often modular, the images are constructed section by section, and the colors do not necessarily suggest landscape, even when associated with nature, from the orange, green, dark green-greys of *Sway #3*, 2008, to the bright turquoise against tan of *Bend-Blue #1*, 2008 or the lime green and pale brown of *Outcrop #2*, 2008. The latter piece, Shapiro claimed, did have nature in mind but it also edged toward artifice, offering both modalities as possibilities—another trope she is not reluctant to use. In her *Black Vertical* series, 2008, black, white and grey bands gracefully, waveringly extended the length of the grey white grounds and while the most abstract of the group in some ways, they are also the most representational in others, their rhythms that of animate things. Shapiro also has a playful side to her thoughtfulness, as seen, say, in the *Black Verticals #1*, in which one undulating stripe, standing apart from a group of anthropomorphic stripes, seems to be haranguing the others. Space also is different in these new works, as the horizontal and vertical stripes have been separated, one set in back, the other in front, pressed closer to the surface plane, projecting the image forward as well as back, creating not a measured or deep space but one that is indeterminate, contemporary.

Shapiro's work does not discount landscape, intimations of which inevitably appear in any painting with a horizon and vertical line unless the artist strives to erase it. She does not try. Although mimesis has never been her interest and landscape never “a direct reference,” in it “are experiences and relationships that are an intrinsic source” for her work, she has written. Ultimately, it is process, formality and the sensations inspired by a complex exterior world that drive her work, dedicated to a viewer who understands perceptual, experiential art—and finds in it sufficient engagement, sufficient beauty, sufficient meaning.

—LILLY WEI

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