

Press Release

Marilyn Lerner

The Journey's The Thing

April 12–May 18, 2024

Public Reception: April 11, 6–8pm

Sprüth Magers, London

Sprüth Magers

In a painting practice that stretches over five decades, New York City-based artist Marilyn Lerner has developed a unique visual vocabulary of colour and form, producing compositions that reverberate in their kaleidoscopic nuance. Her exhibition, *The Journey's The Thing*, on the third floor of Sprüth Magers, London, is the first time her work has been exhibited in the city and outside of the US in ten years.

Lerner's powerful and radiant oil on wood panels speak of her influences from the music and geometric image-making of South and Southeast Asia – where she has travelled frequently – to her interest in early modernist abstraction, in particular, the work of Hilma af Klint and the Russian Constructivists. Lerner has created her own complex personal vocabulary with her approach to form and colour. These influences, amalgamated from different eras and cultures, contribute to her complex approach to surface, shape and hue.

The exhibition at Sprüth Magers features four new paintings made specifically for this show alongside eight earlier works that Lerner chose from the 1990s and early 2000s, evidencing a confident geometric vocabulary that has continuously grown over the past decade.

Take, for example, *Sixteen Improvisation* (2024) and its tondo format, which Lerner has utilised many times before. The blue and green tones of the trapezoids on the outer edge subtly shift as they move around the circle, each time becoming supplemented by another hue mixed into their slight gradations. Outlining between each shape offers a different optical index, creating a vibration across the surface of the painting.

The forms even continue over the edge of the panel, lending the work a sculptural dimension. The two tondos of *Affiliated Characters* (1990) evidence a similar effect – one with a hole in its centre and the other with a circular segment not so much bitten out of it as carefully removed with a cookie cutter. The restrained concentric red and black of the left panel is in opposition of the feathery stripes of black within the other half, punctuated with its staccato-like cut-out and another semi-circular 'D' floating within.

In both of these works, the resultant effect is one of fluid movement, as form becomes time-based. One could draw here a comparison to the cyclical repetitions of gamelan and jaipong music from Bali and Java, where Lerner has spent a lot of time experiencing the culture first-hand rather than translated and filtered through a textbook or museum display, disconnected from the richness of everyday life. 'The music sounded the way I wanted my work to look', she wrote in the late '80s. '...It was enormously compelling; there are parts that are slow, then intense, then melodic, and it is articulated so that the notes become sound notations which I translate as colour notations.'[1] As the American poet and critic John Yau has observed, this synesthetic connection between sound, colour and shape places her alongside figures like the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, who in his 1871 sonnet "Voyelles" ("Vowels") saw a connection between vowels and certain colours.[2]

An earlier work in the exhibition, from over thirty years prior, *Red and Black* (1992) possesses a palate that is markedly more restrained than *Sixteen Improvisations* but with a surface that is no less complicated. The overall form of the panel can be considered simultaneously as shield-like, like a ship's bow in profile, or as a semi-circle with a small oblong addition to where the round has been sliced in two. Sitting within this is a borderless circular nucleus, touching the top and bottom edges of the painting, comprised of both regular triangles and those that have had a segment removed or edge that has become subtly curved. The red and yellow hover on the black surface whilst also seemingly engrained within, as if punctured through.

Lerner's use of fragmented colour-gradient prisms reappears in another new painting, *Her Memory Is A Fickle Thing* (2024), here synthesizing into a crystal core. Shifting combinations of translucency and opacity lend the forms a certain architectural quality, as if sheets of coloured glass, whilst also resembling the facets of a cut jewel. The colours pulsate so strongly in their rich vibrancy that they seem to ring in the ears as much as they reverberate within the eyes. Each complex colour is intuitively mixed – no colour comes directly from a single tube – with a relentless tension between those shapes orbiting the edge and those making their way towards the centre.

Indeed, connections that can be traced between the works in the exhibition complicate each other – when a pattern is recognized in Lerner's work, it is soon broken, shifting on to something else. Symmetry and asymmetry intermingle, and any perceptible nods towards particular theories of colour soon undo themselves. That she doesn't fit into the main currents and -isms of post-war abstraction, occupying a seemingly singular position, is testimony to the strength and complexity of her paintings.

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[1] Marilyn Lerner interviewed by Lilly Wei in 'The Peripatetic Artist: 14 Statements', Art in America, July 1989.

[2] John Yau, 'A Singular Enterprise', Hyperallergic, September 11, 2016.

Marilyn Lerner (*1942, Milwaukee, USA) lives and works in New York, NY. She received her BS from the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, WI, and her MFA from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY. She has held numerous solo exhibitions at galleries and institutions including Kate Werble Gallery, New York, NY (2023, 2021, 2018); CUE Art Foundation, New York, NY (2016); Butler Gallery, Kilkenny Castle, Kilkenny, Ireland (2014); Robert Morrison Gallery, New York, NY (1992); John Good Gallery, New York, NY (1989, 1987); Kornblee Gallery, New York, NY (1976); and Zabriskie Gallery, New York, NY (1969). Her work has been exhibited in group shows at venues including the Pera Museum, Istanbul, Turkey; the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Staten Island, NY; Madison Art Center, Madison, WI; PS1, New York, NY; the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, among others. Lerner's work is in many public collections including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Norton Museum of Art, Palm Beach, Florida; The Office of Public Works for the State Art Collection, Ireland; McCrory Corporation, New York, NY; Prudential Life Insurance, New York, NY; Progressive Corporation, Cleveland OH.

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