

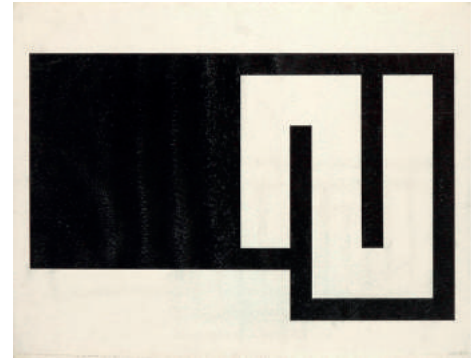
Meandering, Abstractly

Martin Barré, Sheila Hicks, Julije Knifer,
Mangelos, Bernard Piffaretti

Currated by Paul Galvez

January 14 – March 25, 2017

Opening on January 14, 2017, 6-8pm



Julije Knifer

21-25 XI 10-16X 21-25X 10-15XI. 4-7 XII 10-13.XII.81, 1981
Graphite on paper, 19 5/8 x 25 5/8 in. / 50 x 65 cm

For decades after MoMA's 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* Alfred Barr's iconic diagram was the image of modern art's history: a series of -isms hung on a genealogical tree, from post-Impressionism to Surrealism. In 2013, the same institution envisaged a 21st century update, more interlacing network than hereditary branches. *Meandering, Abstractly* re-visits postwar European abstraction via less well-known routes: Zagreb and Peru, instead of New York and Düsseldorf.

The show's basic question is this: how did artists like Julije Knifer, Mangelos, Martin Barré, Bernard Piffaretti, and Sheila Hicks come to re-interpret the legacies of Malevitch, Mondrian, Max Bill, and Josef Albers in such unexpected and highly original ways, leading them to produce works whose extraordinary inventiveness is due in no small part to the unique historical and geographic circumstances of their creation.

Knifer's Meander *M/3*, 1972, whose winding black band is both startlingly simple yet dynamic, can serve as a visual metaphor for the exhibition's path, which will likewise follow the complex development of abstraction across a variety of artists and media. Chronologically, it begins with the late 1950s and early 1960s work by Knifer and Mangelos, members of the Zagreb neo-avant-garde group Gorgona (recently highlighted in MoMA's 2014 exhibition *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960-1980* and in solo shows at galerie frank elbaz and Peter Freeman, Inc). Their special position between East and West led them to break with the Russian models of their teachers and to produce some of the earliest abstract works in postwar Europe.

Recent scholarship by critics and contemporary artists themselves has led to a burgeoning interest in the conceptual painting of postwar France. Martin Barré and Bernard Piffaretti represent two generations of French artists who during the 1970s and 1980s worked out conceptual schemes from within painting at a time when the medium was erroneously thought to be dead. Included here is a large Martin Barré painting that will be shown for the very first time since its original exhibition in 1979. A forthcoming retrospective is being organized by Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, for 2018.

Finally, the fabric pieces of Sheila Hicks reveal a more global route to abstraction, one begun at Yale in the 1950s in the company of the art historian George Kubler and Bauhaus artists Anni and Josef Albers, passing through the textile traditions of Latin America, before finally landing in Paris in 1964, where her radical approach to color and shape has thrived ever since. Her fiber constructions are increasingly being shown in major exhibitions and commissions, including the Whitney Biennial, Hayward Gallery, and the Musée Carnavalet.

Paul Galvez holds a PhD from Columbia University. He is a Research Fellow at the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History, where he works on modern art from the nineteenth century to the present. His writing has appeared in journals such as *Artforum*, *Cahiers d'art moderne*, and *October* as well as in several monographs: *Courbet: A Dream of Modern Art* (Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, 2011); *Martin Barré: the decisive years* (Éditions Dilecta, Paris, 2013), an exhibition catalogue published the same year as a 2-person show he curated on the work of Barré and R.H. Quaytman at Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris; *Brice Marden: Graphite Drawings* (Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, 2014); *David Balula: Ember Harbor* (Shelter Press, 2014); *Bernard Piffaretti, 1980-2016 - Catalogue Raisonné* (MAMCO, Geneva, 2016); and *Bernard Piffaretti, Works: 1986-2015* (Karma, New York, 2016).

Mangelos (1921-1987)

The artistic career of the Zagreb-based art historian, curator, and critic Dimitrije Bašicevic begins in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when under the pseudonym Mangelos he starts striking out and blacking out pages of books and newspapers in an attempt to “negate” painting, as in *paysage du plusquamparfait 1.*, 1949 and *Negation de la peinture (Portrait of Dostoevsky)*, 1951-56. Mangelos soon settles upon the black monochromatic field as the ultimate form of negation. The erased field, however, would also become for him a site of creation, what he would call a “tabula rasa” or clean slate. For Mangelos it is only by starting over, by acquiring knowledge anew, that postwar Europe could reset itself after years of war (thus the references in his work to Greek philosophy, e.g. *Paysage du Pythagora*, 1951-56).

Julije Knifer (1924-2004)

Like his compatriot Mangelos, Julije Knifer benefitted from postwar Zagreb's relatively open borders and artistic pluralism. Knifer's art starts from the basic units of square and plane (*Study 3* and *Study 16*, both 1959) followed in the 1960s by his signature form, the meander (usually in black and white but here, in *M/3*, 1972, uniquely in yellow). His graphite and pencil drawings, especially, extend the black square into seemingly limitless configurations of shape, scale, and rhythm, demonstrating that in the right hands the most minimal of forms is enough to sustain a lifetime of art (three of these paper works are exhibited here).

Martin Barré (1924-1993)

Coming of age as a painter during the heyday of French Informel painting, Paris-based artist Martin Barré would eventually reject the movement's gestural flourishes. In order to diminish arbitrariness in his practice, Barré would make rule-based systems his keystone from the 1970s onwards. The example here, *79-A-62x262* (exhibited publicly for the first time since it's initial showing in 1979), is a sanded, wall-like white ground, spanned by three green, red, and yellow stripes delineated with thin grey lines. The “grid” extended originally to two companion canvases installed below it, but not shown here. The three together would have constituted an abstract composition of its own against the background of the entire gallery wall. Thus, *79-A-62x262* suggests both the extension of the grid but also playful disruptions within it.

Bernard Piffaretti (1955-)

The work of Martin Barré offered Bernard Piffaretti, a French artist of the following generation, a way of doing conceptual art from *within* painting. Whereas Barré turned to systems to combat gestural abstraction, Piffaretti turned to repetition. The large vertical painting here, *Untitled*, 2015, is exemplary in this regard: a red line divides the canvas into two halves, onto which Piffaretti has repeated the same composition, with slight variation. This protocol, that the artist has employed almost exclusively since the 1980s, permits the utmost diversity of composition, since the look of any one design is secondary to the overall act of repeating it. The exhibition also presents one of the exceptions to the rule, *Kino*, 2014, whose four white panels, of different size and stripe, generate cinema-like movement.

Sheila Hicks (1934-)

Though not painting per se, the weavings of Sheila Hicks nonetheless are inspired by modernist painting. Her formative years at Yale University introduced her to the thought of German émigré artists Josef and Anni Albers as well as to the art of the Americas through art historian George Kubler. The diptych *Memory of the Gentle Monsoon*, 2015, is a stunning example of how color interacts at the level of individual strings. After school, Hicks settled in Mexico where she associated with the local avant-garde, including figures like Mathias Goeritz and Luis Barragan, among others. Her encounter with architects like Barragan would be instrumental in her larger site-related pieces such as the 1967 tapestries for the Ford Foundation (to which *Masonry Panel*, 1981, the modular square painting exhibited here, is related). The monochromatic square, *Tirer-Compressor*, 2015 (a precedent to *Conversation*, 2016, shown here) likewise draws upon avant-garde precedent. But Hicks, now based in Paris, invests this classic form with the textural richness of wool and linen, proving like all the artists in the exhibition that abstraction has and continues to meander down different paths.