

ADJUSTED FOCI:
PAMELA JORDEN STARTING POINTS
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BIG PICTURE PRACTICE (DISCOURSE):

At this point in the game, the first thing to say about talking about abstraction (painterly, gestural, geometric) is that it has all already been said. Hermeneutic arguments have been made and revised aplenty; many cooks in that discursive kitchen. And what has not been said, repeatedly by many, over the past century, is unsaid because it cannot properly be conveyed by anything other than direct experience. Hallelujah.

The second thing to say is that, nevertheless, much remains to be said. Language's linearity cannot quite nail the fluid simultaneity and rich complexity arising from a face-to-face stare down with a particular convergence of color, shape, and mark as they dance together to Pamela Jordan's symbolist, cubist, expressionist (neo-expressionist), formalist (neo-formalist), pop-op beat. Movement is ever present in the electric mind and open eye. The consideration continues; the descriptive accounting is never complete, never conclusive. Painting keeps happening and questions, new and old, persistently arise.

Part of talking about abstract painting today, then, involves talking about a process, an experience of repetition and persistence. One look after another, one stroke after another: the practice forms. This repetition has a strong appeal, producing the cozy comfort of familiarity and the pleasurable buzz afforded by recognition. The discovery of pattern, and the surprise of subsequent deviations from it, are sensory pleasures so acute I feel sight between my legs as much as behind my eyes.

Far from sameness, repetition is a form of conviction—and spinning in dizzying circles is a natural high. At the same time, yanked back to earth, we acknowledge that the "umbilical cord of gold" tying art to capital sponsors the medium's (re)current heyday and fuels abstract paintings' will to reproduce itself, to live large another day. Time has turned abstraction into an image-bankable look and aesthetic trope, making déjà vu a common experience: abstract paintings look like paintings of 'abstract painting'. Where have I seen that before? Vague, unanchored recognition flips into a kind of free-floating anonymity, a clouding of authorship that is perhaps anti-patriarchal and certainly a condition of the Information Age and its media proliferation. Sometimes, I'm not even sure what abstract painting (or an abstract painting) is. Not being sure is such a rush. Abstraction's intimate proximity to mimesis and futility is a relationship of blur and bleed. Which makes me feel political when I say that paying critical attention to the mutual imbrication of visuality and thought is an increasingly necessary survival skill. Questions, new and old, persistently arise. Hallelujah.

BIG PICTURE PRACTICE (NON-OBJECTIVITY):

So much depends upon the countless contingent circumstances of viewing pictures, the many variable factors that affect our receptivity, our associative agility, our curiosity, our doubt, our comfort, and our excitement on any given day. Abstraction's ambiguity is compulsively primed to receive, nay, draw out our flickering, undulating mental projections. Call it a meditation rock. The paintings are both passive and highly sensitive to psychic contact, like a mood ring, while also being mood altering. The room in my mind wears these paintings like jewelry or plumage, dripping with rainbows. I am made aware of them in relation to the decorated, subjective body.

BIG PICTURE PRACTICE (ART HISTORY):

Historical lineage and aesthetic genealogy, self-proclaimed by the artist: “Quickly, then, here are a few artists that I always come back to: Philip Guston and Amy Sillman, both for their use of color and the activity of painting. After seeing the Guston retrospective in San Francisco, I thought so much about the cadmium orange he uses. It is in the early abstract paintings and then it always shows up as the color of his wife’s hair in the figurative work. His palette is pretty limited and so charged, specific. Sometimes I look at Amy Sillman’s paintings when I’m stumped and need color inspiration. Her layering, the working over, and search for the space in the paintings are super interesting to me. I love the Frank Stella 1958 paintings because in this work he is also searching for structure and the paintings are not yet as solid and determined as the black paintings. Love Eva Hesse paintings (early 1960s) for the loose renderings, her collage of influences, and the slippery paint. Helen Frankenthaler for her color flows and the physicality of color. Josef Albers. Sonia and Robert Delaunay for the energy and movement. Hilma af Klint. Her paintings were a way for her to explore ideas that were bigger than her understanding of the world, and they have a kind of mystical, imaginary relationship to modernization. They’re a way of relating the body to modernization, or relating the personal and intimate with the vast. Nancy Holt for her *Sun Tunnels*.”

Homage, inheritance, or research: invoking iconic moments in Modernism, from Orphism and Symbolism to Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, a half or full century later, mines history for buried lessons, excavating gulfs of difference as well as lines of continuities between then and now. One way or another, consciously or not, every mark reveals its moment. Painting is one kind of advanced time-travel.

BIG PICTURE PRACTICE (PERSONAL TRAJECTORY):

Looking back, Jorden’s early paintings—those predominantly dark, nocturnal, and shadowy ones, on black grounds—describe a rather distant, even outer space sense of space. An indefinite yet palpable feeling of depth often combines with suggestions of speed into a rush, a flurry, a loop-di-loop frenzy. Visual activity is unevenly distributed, concentrated in rich densities that resemble swarming, teeming things—clusters and cultures of forms that appear at times urban and futuristic, floral and confectionary, bacterial and mineral.

Moving forward, Jorden’s frame zooms in on the areas of activity, like detail shots; space compresses in close-up abstractions. Scale shifts, depth collapses: there are fewer little blobs and squiggles as the size of those marks begin to align more closely with the size of the picture. Unmarked, so-called negative space gets increasingly carved up—the story of the world—and larger shapes traverse and colonize the whole field. The feeling of shapes as shards emerges: a pointed but not hardedge worldview. Disconnected pieces of brilliant color angle space vaguely, provisionally, dreamily but still illusionistically like rock facets and crystals, shattered ice and splintered wood, rods and cones.

What began as accumulations of shards and arrow-points soon relax into landscape scenes of quivering pools, stuttering streaks, and directional blocks. While the acute angularity of painted shapes erodes, the fragmentary nature of mark-making remains distinct in short, abrupt, isolated patches. The calibrated and varied width of one brush versus another focuses attention

more on the precise indexicality of each discretely delivered stroke. The effect is transportive: we are there, with her in the studio; we see the pensive delay and restraint between lines; we see the final work and perceive its cumulative process as an exploded view with great temporal dimension between layers. As bits of line and stacks of separate stick strokes, the act of painting can look like a study in touching-down and taking-off, skid-marks and switchbacks. Speed is dotted-line implicit. Tear here.

But fluidity prevails and the hand remains primary. Jorden’s painterly techniques emphasize washes, stains, sweeps, soaks, and saturation—above all, looseness. Liquidity is so embraced that the brush sometimes acts like a squeegee and erasure is poured on a black fabric ground in capfuls of bleach. Thinned out, paint achieves much through its uncontrollability. Forgoing impasto and haptic textures in relief, Jorden explores paint mostly as liquid pigment wiped, swept, slosed, and sponged across flat lands in contained chunks or semi-transparent veils that cascade in an array of drips and rivulets, bringing gravity to the fore.

Elsewhere, more small-scale, swarming, school-of-fish forms convene. Despite the consistent insistence on manual gesture throughout Jorden’s paintings, the look contains rough digital undertones. Positing new modular grid systems and jumbled bit matrices, an incipient pixel-paradigm plays out across the interlocking rows of silver triangles (sails? fins?) that fill several dark circle paintings. Painterly abstraction in the Digital Age seems to include an ongoing, if not unconscious, investigation into novel shapes the pixel can take. The times demand it. While the triangle is one anti-pixel ventured, the circle is another and the irregular, jagged polygon yet another still distinguishing her grand scheme of things. Periodically, we yearn to question the formal foundation and essential shape of culture’s current modality, ie data.

CIRCULAR PICTURE PRACTICE:

The circle:
microscopic or
telescopic, either way
it designates a fixed-upon
spot that needs her focus or
a detail of something that
extends and may be
unbounded.

The round framing device is a graphic lasso, holding the eye’s attention and concentration on a particular, magnified visual zone. That steady zone is a porthole onto shapes swimming in a larger sea—landscape or vortex. On parade, a world passes by in front of these unblinking oculi. We always only see a small part of something larger. Or, alternately, the circle bounds an experiment in growth like a petri dish, a germination habitat where marks bloom, multiply, and spread. An outward, centrifugal flow of ripples and rings. Or, the “O” of Orphism is a synesthetic glory hole and booming boom box. Sonic dimension echoes and reverberates spherically with lush tonalities: expanding and overlapping sound waves, a sonar ping, a banged gong, the pulsing diaphragm of a speaker. The acoustic sun, moon, and foghorns Arthur Dove painted resonate here in the art historical distance. Glowing-light atmospherics, like a stoplight in the fog or a spectral prism: halo, softness, astral fuzz, haze, and shimmer. The metallic glitter and faint iridescence in some paints she uses (the silvers, with mica flakes) are

precisely unphotographable—even as, on a certain level, hers are paintings about vision in (or defiantly in spite of) this age of cameras and roboticized lenses.

TARGET PICTURE PRACTICE:

Concentricity:
Targets establish
striking distance, falling
in and out of view. Among
ideas she brings into view:
Johns' Targets. Bull's-eye.
Fisheye. And bird's-eye.
Vanishing points. And
lenses for looking
into them.

Locating a center always entails an understanding of periphery. Charting a personal relation between circumference and core, Jorden is interested in the non-objective, elusive phenomenon of peripheral vision. What is seen on the outside edges of perception? Beautiful, perhaps Medusa-like things that can't be looked at directly. Movement is implied in this kind of painting vision, whether it is the movement of turning one's head or the dizzying stillness of a whirling dervish or the tumble of laundry on its spin cycle. Or the zoom-in and zoom-out of perspective, tracked by a mechanical eye. Or the slow, methodical, physical tracing and retracing the support's round body with a loaded brush. Jorden cuts, bisects, refracts, and partitions her targets—measuring slices of the pie, scanning a radial map?—with different wedges painted in contrasting patterns and palettes, as though seen through segments of frosted, distortion glass. Designed to mesmerize, they fulfill the Barthesian truth that “love at first sight is a hypnosis”. A single, tapered vertical spine often bifurcates the targets, turning its latent unity into an image of penetration, cleavage, and mitosis. Going in and out of split focus, the cut targets are like optometric eye tests. I begin to see something, as though having just woken up, then rub my eyes. She is testing lenses, biological and mechanical, as she images them. Sclera, iris, pupil: the soft organic vulnerability of the eyeball fears the threat of its own laceration. The eyeball is always also about to be the sliced eyeball, cut by a sharp straight shape like a Bunuelian razor's edge that spills the organ's seeping, aqueous insides: ooze, leak, bleed, and drip.

SHAPE-SHIFT PICTURE PRACTICE:

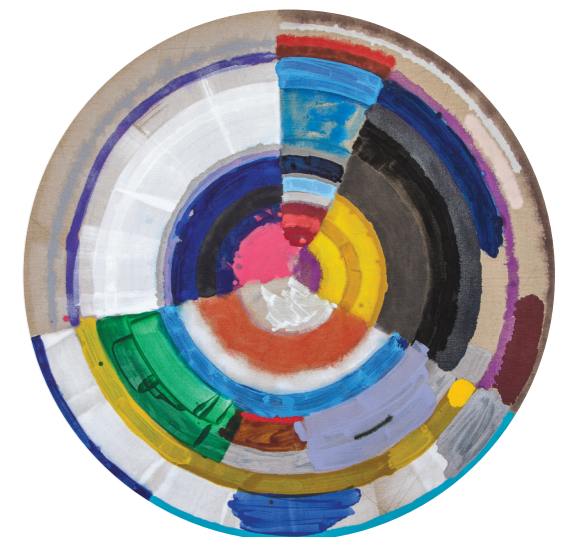
Shape is a priori to the act of painting, primary here even to the fierceness of color. Painted shapes forego the linearity of drawing, concerned more with planar existence: “The paintings usually start with an idea of a particular shape or size and an idea for the first move most of the time. Then they change. I don't really predetermine where they will go.” Regular, rectangular shapes lead to round shapes. Then to odd, irregular shapes—tilted and stilted, hip-jutting-out polygons. Suggestive as much of negative spaces as foregrounded bodies, the asymmetrical forms are interstitial zones covered between places. Oddness defamiliarizes the regularity all around us.

Her shaped paintings are simple, strong, and strange geometries—instantaneously grasped as contained, solid figures that are uncomplicated enough to easily remember. This memorizability peaks at mid-to-long distance, when the shapes

shrink down to icons, stamps, or thumbnails. Closer up the view is a different story. Painting occurs as a heterogeneous piling on of opacity and translucence, shiny punctuations and matte expanses, bright blotches and smears that are so subtle in combination that they cannot be memorized nor seen all at once. Spring green, sky blue, pollen yellow, nasturtium orange... hues this vivid, alive, and primary—further brightened in contrast with the warm gray linen ground—exceed the words to describe them. Her content must be absorbed incrementally, passage by passage, and studied privately over time. Directional hatch marks woozily describe bent, folded, and peaked pictorial spaces—their angles reminiscent of a mountain range seen from above, a forest of pine trees, the skeleton of a filleted fish, the spine of a feather, or ruffled herringbone tweed. Actual and illusionistic kinkiness collide in different dimensions, at cross-purposes. Imagery, color, and handling of medium work to confuse, deepen, and throw into doubt the painting's totality and wholesome objecthood. As though allegorical, geometric structures get painted over, obscured by a whole other looser world of pattern, improvisation, and accident. There is spinning, tumbling, rolling, and some fancy, heel-toe footwork on record: “Music doesn't really inform my work”, the artist notes, “but it assists it in happening”. One needs a foundation to build on or obliterate—a stable ground to push against, a tidiness to scramble and mess, a solid floor to dance on, a still point from which to turn away.

GROUP PICTURE PRACTICE:

Against a spacious white ground, hung in a row or clustered in a cloud, installations of the diversely shaped paintings punch through like cutouts, pictograms, tunnels, or peepholes to parallel dimensions. A group of Jorden's paintings generate a coded grammar, punctuated by circles like periods in a sentence. No, the circles are hardly periods. They might be bullet points or pauses. So often appearing in teams and containing additional rings on their faces, the circles are never singular. They are social circles. They come in multiples and fractions. Numerous, they proliferate the conclusiveness of a period into the ongoing inquiry of an ellipsis. Meanwhile, those irregular puzzle shaped pieces pose question marks through their asymmetries, embodying a smiling, cocked crookedness that is quizzical.



Sone, 2013
oil and graphite on linen
48 inches diameter