

CONVERSATION 9/17/14:

PAMELA JORDEN

ALICE KÖNITZ

KAVERI NAIR, EDITOR



untitled, 2014
oil and bleach on linen
34 inches diameter

**PAMELA**

I'm thinking about a photo I took a few years ago of an unusual mural painted on a boomerang-shaped wall at the corner of Micheltorena Street and Sunset. I can't believe how much this image reminds me of a recent painting I made for my show in San Francisco [untitled, 2014]. I have driven by the mural almost every day for years. I love how the bold colors fade over time, and how it is weathered by rust stains and graffiti. Gravity and entropy transform the mural. Then all of a sudden it is restored and repainted with crazy bright colors. That fading, changing and reappearance—these transformations are exciting to me.

KAVERI

I love how the geometry and artificial color act as a foil to the rust stain. That painting you mention works in a similar way. You slap a square onto a round canvas, then you divide the shapes into black and white triangles and arcs, and finally you nearly drown this crisp black and white image in chaotic floods of color. You are layering duality upon duality. The result is subtle and multidimensional yet full of tensile strength.

ALICE

I also notice a perspectival depth which makes me read it as a landscape.

PAMELA

Yes, I think the embedded horizon line is pretty important. If the painting was comprised of just the pours then it would be primarily about paint and its formal properties, but having that under-bleaching means you look *through* in a different way.

ALICE

I like that it uses a language of representation while not actually representing anything that we could easily classify. It gives a vague idea of a landscape, but it's just two triangles bisecting a square.

Have you ever worked in a representational way?

PAMELA

Not exactly. Early on in art school I made collages using found materials and printed wrapping paper. Maybe using imagery or prefab patterns from commercially printed materials was my way of making a representational painting. I had an old lamp made of round capiz shells that I disassembled and glued to a canvas and then painted over. This made kind of a dot pattern, not unlike what I appreciated in the patterned wrapping paper. Pattern was a given that I would start with and then cut up, break apart, and reassemble. It introduces a structure and it is often a jumping-off point for me.

In more recent work, I'm drawn to the ubiquity of certain geometric forms like circles and triangles. While visiting Chaco Canyon in New Mexico last year, I learned about a spiral petroglyph carved behind two rock slabs on Fajada Butte. During the summer solstice the sun shines through the rocks and creates a "sun dagger" that perfectly bisects the spiral form. It reminded me so much of the cut targets I have made. The architecture of Chaco Canyon is also designed to interact with the celestial movement of the sun and moon. I like how geometry can provide a window through

which one can observe the vast and unknowable. I'm thinking about Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*, for example.

KAVERI

So the petroglyph isn't the reference that preceded your work; your work preceded your noticing the reference, as if there were some sort of mystical recurrence of forms in the universe. There is something very pleasing about that.

You aren't making explicit cultural and historical references but your geometry isn't a platonic ideal or pure mathematical relationship either. The circles and triangles rhyme in the mind with something experienced in the world, like a vintage capiz shell lamp or the mural on Micheltorena Street. I suppose that patterns and geometry will inevitably evoke those kinds of lived connections—different connections for different viewers.

PAMELA

Rhyming is a good word for it. It is not my interest to illustrate something that already exists, more to allow for new associations or relationships to happen.

KAVERI

As Alice mentioned, your painting sometimes evokes landscape, but in a very general way. You set up the basic conditions of a landscape, no more. I don't get the sense that you are interested in conveying something like, "this is the light in Glendale on Sunday morning".



Tecopa, 2013
oil on linen
44 x 72 inches

PAMELA

No, for me it is not about that kind of specificity of location. It is about perception and looking in a more general sense. Each painting has a particular and internal specificity; it has got its own experience, or what it does or can do. I'm interested in the experience of looking: the physical and phenomenological aspect of vision and how this relates to space and lived experience.

Alice, is that something you relate to?

ALICE

I'm very interested in the experience of space: the space that I experience outside of my work and the physical/perceptual experience of the sculptures themselves. Many of my sculptures implicitly tell you how you move around them. Your perception shifts as you do.

One of the things that fascinates me with Pamela's paintings is the experience that you have as you walk by them. Some of them unfold and turn into something different as you see them from a different angle. They are shape-shifting, relying on movement. You discover new things about them as you move along and things that were obvious before disappear. That is definitely something that is important to me about my sculptures as well.

PAMELA

You have said that you make objects but you don't want them to just be sculpture, you want them to have a function in some way.

KAVERI

I see why that statement might resonate with you, Pamela. What is the function of a painting if not to act as a kind of perceptual or optical apparatus? It's an object made for looking, looking through, and revealing the conditions of looking.

ALICE

Sometimes the idea of a specific function (in relation to an activity) defines what a sculpture ends up being. I have made a few films where I employ this relation.

One of the pieces where I first thought about these things very deliberately was a sculpture that was based on the idea of a taco stand. My decisions in making the piece went back and forth between thinking of something that could function as a taco stand and making something that would be formally interesting as a sculpture. A part of the sculpture was a folding screen. Its function in a taco stand was to attract customers and to keep them at bay at the same time. Formally I was interested in something that could be rearranged. I thought it was fascinating to see the lines meeting at different angles like a drawing in space.



Alice Könitz
Light Communication, 2004
video
05:42

PAMELA

Alice, your video *Light Communication* really resonates for me because of the mysterious communication between the actors. I love how the actors capture and interact in a play of light and geometry within a natural and organic environment.

ALICE

Yes, for the video I asked my friends to wear masks that I made which loosely established them as characters in a communal society that communicates through light reflection. They stand in a pond at Switzer Falls and communicate by reflecting sunlight off tiny mirrors onto each other, into the camera and onto geometric sculptures that receive the light in distinct ways. They also reflect the light directly into the camera, which creates geometric light patterns (lens flares) in the video. A remote influence for the piece was a Renaissance painting of a holy man who dives into the water of Venice to get a relic. The swimming body takes on a strange shape and color, as he is half above the water and half below. The experience of light reflecting or breaking can be quite mysterious.

PAMELA

I also want a painting to be an object that can reflect and be active, and be in communication with the viewer. There is an exciting kind of tension in the act of looking, whether the painting becomes a contemplative object that you can just stare at and meditate on or something you look at with questions as to why it is the way it is. A painting can act like a sundial affected by light and interacting with light. That is one way to think about how I'm using light play and spectral colors.

KAVERI

The word "spectral", with its two meanings, one scientific, one supernatural, puts me in mind of early abstract painters like Kandinsky and Mondrian, for whom color was both of those things.

PAMELA

Lately I have been looking at the work of Hilma af Klint, who was a contemporary of those artists. She was a pioneer of abstraction, and she was also a medium. There are complicated allusions in her work. Her work fascinates me not only because her paintings are so personal. I recognize energy and an elemental force in the work. They seem to be her understanding of the mind and body and a way to communicate her experience and the feeling of what she found mysterious and frightening.

KAVERI

Do you think painters today think of abstraction as spiritual? I think some do, maybe especially in Los Angeles, where it seems like artists are always doing things like going to the desert to take sound baths.

PAMELA

Oh, that is one of my favorite experiences! A sound bath at the Integratron! You lie on the floor of a beautiful wooden dome shaped space and sound frequencies created with quartz crystal bowls vibrate and resonate around and through your body. It's a very powerful experience.

ALICE

It's interesting to think about how to define that experience. Going to the Integratron is very physical. You hear sounds, and they do something to make you feel good. I guess the spiritual is inward perception.

PAMELA

It's a very focused and holistic sensory experience: you hear, feel and see simultaneously.

KAVERI

I feel that part of the purpose of making abstract paintings is to get at the nature of perception and other aspects of experience that are hard to talk about. Why would we make them otherwise?

PAMELA

Well, a painting is something you can experience in an instant or over time. You can comprehend it instantly, but also look at it for years. I can never get tired of looking at my favorite paintings. There is an excitement of speeding and slowing time with objects, of having them unfold. And I agree that this is outside of language.

ALICE

Yes, I agree. I'm not so interested in work that you can pin down to a very specific meaning. It stops being interesting the minute that you are able to do that. The experiential quality is something that remains fascinating.

KAVERI

There is an experiential quality for the artist, and there is an experiential quality for the viewer. Do you think of them as being the same?

PAMELA

I have to use myself as the gauge. What is happening for me? When is it right, when is it challenging? When is it becoming something I didn't expect—and hopefully the viewer won't have expected it either? I'm always trying to create a disruption that is going to shift things enough, to unsettle

or redirect my expectations enough that it keeps it exciting for me. I don't know if you can pre-determine a viewer's response, really, but you can still try to communicate. But it's also exciting that they will have their own take on what you do, based on their experience, culture, relationship to color, and so on. With abstraction I like how someone comes to an artwork and wonders, "what is that?" It begins with a question, which is exciting.

People can see what they want to see. The work just has to be doing something. With some paintings, I don't know where they are going, and then finally I will figure out what is happening. It can be this crazy thing that only makes sense to me, but that is fine, something is happening. So then it's closer to being done.

KAVERI

That implies a certain faith that "it's doing something" is an objective thing. And I think that is true. It might be doing something different for someone else, but it's doing something.

ALICE

Yes, I think that is sort of objective.

KAVERI

But that is kind of magical if you think about it.



Hilma af Klint
The Dove No 1, 1915
oil on canvas
61 x 46 1/2 inches



Sundial, 2013
oil on linen
7 1/8 inches diameter