

Gloria Stern: Altered Space

If I had to pick a word to describe the paintings in *Altered Space*, it would be 'restless.' *Rhythm* – to take one example – vibrates before the viewer; it is full of latent energy and compositionally tensioned as if it were an elastic band stretched almost to its breaking point. At a macro level, the work is comprised of interlocking, Tetris-like geometric shapes, creating a dynamic painterly field. But the artist, Gloria Stern, goes further than this, giving each shape a different internal abstract treatment, including wave forms, S-shapes, zigzags, horizontal and vertical stripes, squares within squares, squares subdivided into triangular quarters, and a loose grid of dots – this “all-over” quality recalling the suggested kineticism of Eduardo Paolozzi’s collages and screenprints of the 1970s. Indeed, in the upper right of *Rhythm*, a cantilever-like form enters the field at a 45-degree angle – poised like the baton of a pinball machine, as if it is about to set the rest of the component parts in motion, sending the viewer’s eye, like a pinball, ricocheting around the canvas at full speed.



Rhythm, oil on canvas, 61x46cm

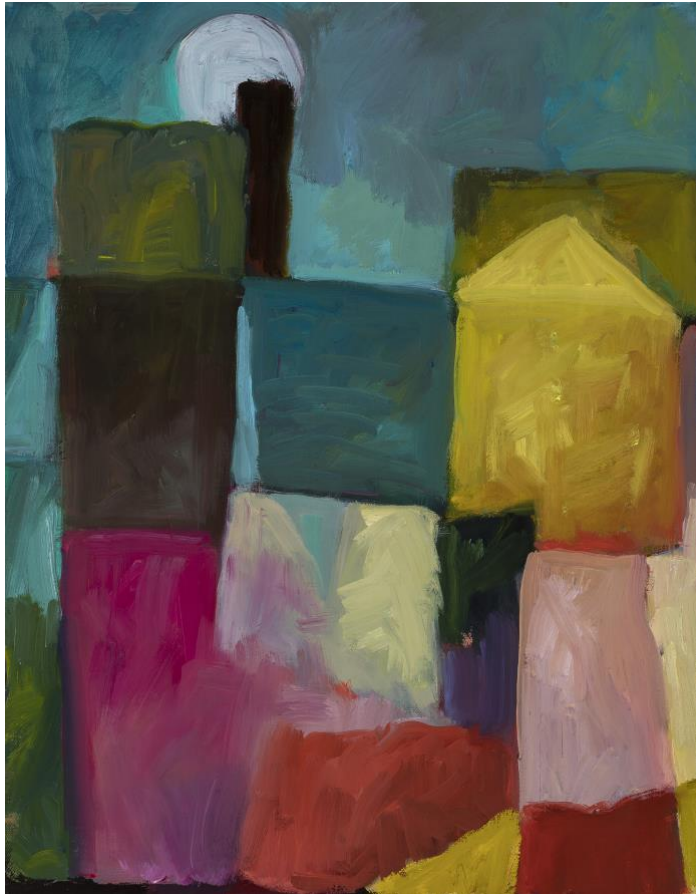
Rhythm is not just compositionally restless; its palette is pulsating with energy too. Sky-blue columns fight with their deep purple and pure black neighbours; coral pops against black; even the more subdued lighter blocks of colour vary in subtle ways, disallowing the viewer's eye to fully settle. Moreover, Stern's brushwork – which deliberately, as Danni Zuvela has perceptively noted, eschews the 'sterility of hard-edged abstraction' in favour of an 'organic vulnerability' – is suggestive of the momentum or velocity that drives these paintings. What is idiosyncratic about the brushwork in this painting is its brushiness, so to speak. While *Rhythm* is evidently compositionally related to hard-edge geometric abstraction, Stern doesn't use rulers or masking tape to create crisp edges between her shapes and colours. Instead, she leaves the shape of the brush visible; she doesn't push the colour all the way to the "edge" of the shape. Indeed, instead of "edges," what this style of brushwork produces are little apertures between shapes, indiscriminate zones that reveal sub-paintings, other colours, other compositions, other possibilities.

Even the more pared back compositions, such as the gently curved and floating rectangles of *Green Forms*, are still charged with a latent dynamism, here produced by the contrast of deep red with a pale, through bright, blue-green. Coupled with this sea-like colour, the undulating horizontal line that moves across the lower part of the painting conjures waves or the ocean – constant motion. The suggestion of an ocean here is not completely imaginary. Stern's artistic background is, after all, firmly rooted in representational painting (of landscapes, cityscapes, and figures therein) – even if much of this representational work does consciously flirt with abstraction. The artist has noted that, despite a concerted effort to commit wholly to an abstract vernacular, references to 'the sea, the countryside, people and the built world' still manage to creep in.



Green Forms, oil on canvas,, 94x92cm

The abstraction of the exquisite painting *Moonlight*, for instance, is belied by its title, which reveals to us a full moon rising above – perhaps – a skyline of chimneys and rooftops against an evening sky. Likewise, the mere slither of a circle in the upper right corner of *Evening* is suggestive enough of night sky– with both *Moonlight* and *Evening* recalling the economy of Paul Klee's own night skies in works such as *Fire, Full Moon* (1933).



Moonlight, oil on canvas, 61x46cm



Evening, oil on canvas, 46x61cm

Stern has developed an idiosyncratic method to combat this encroaching narrative; she has explained that constantly turning her paintings on a 360-degree rotation on her easel 'instantly disconnects [her] from realism and brings [her] back to the process of abstraction.' Evidence of this process was, until relatively recently, visible in *Monumental Dream*, one corner of which bore paint drip lines that intersected at right angles. This painting was formerly abstract, once comprising of a quilt-like patchwork of colourful squares and rectangles. It has since, however, been transformed into a quasi-figurative landscape – with the left-hand side of the composition retaining the abstraction of its earlier incarnation, organic tiles of pink and sky blue, and the right recessively as if a theatrical backdrop, backlit by the moon. now evocative of a red termite mound against black and crimson-hued clouds, layered recessively as if a theatrical backdrop, backlit by the moon.



Monumental Dream, oil on canvas, 92x122cm

This is all to say that Stern does not allow her paintings to sit still; in the process of their construction, they are restless objects. Even upon their completion Stern's paintings still have the potential to keep turning, as the artist notes that 'ultimately, I would like my paintings to work from whichever way they are positioned' on the wall.

Imagining Stern in her studio, standing at her easel, painting, then turning, painting then turning again, I come to think – perhaps a little strangely – of a concrete mixer, knowing that in order for concrete not to set, it needs to keep spinning. We can think of the concrete mixer as a metaphor for the medium of painting itself, for painting – at a fundamental level – describes the process of pigment transitioning from a fluid, supple, malleable condition to a fixed, hardened, or permanent state. The highest achievement of Stern's paintings is the way they retain a sense of this latent state of possibility, of the fluidity and malleability of the medium of painting, even in spite of themselves.

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