

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

One of New York's Purest Abstract Painters

Harriet Korman has never wanted to become part of someone else's story.



John Yau May 23, 2020



Harriet Korman, "Focus" (2011), oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches (image courtesy the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, photo by Kevin Noble)

Harriet Korman's career is a benchmark for abstract painting, particularly as it has unfolded in New York between 1972, when her work was included in the Whitney Annual, and the present.

In striking contrast to many of her peers, Korman has never developed a signature style, nor has she ever introduced imagery into her work. There is no light, shadow,

illusionism, or space in her paintings. They are human scaled (none are larger than nine feet, as far as I know), completely flat, and chromatically vibrant. Despite all the restraints that Korman adheres to — or, more accurately, options she has not taken — her paintings are always vivid and unpredictable.

Every mark and color Korman applies reinforces the fact that a painting is a two-dimensional surface. By stripping down the paintings to the irreducible elements of line and color, but never settling for a fashionable format, such as a grid, to deliver them, she attains a singular position as one of New York's purest abstract painters without a brand.



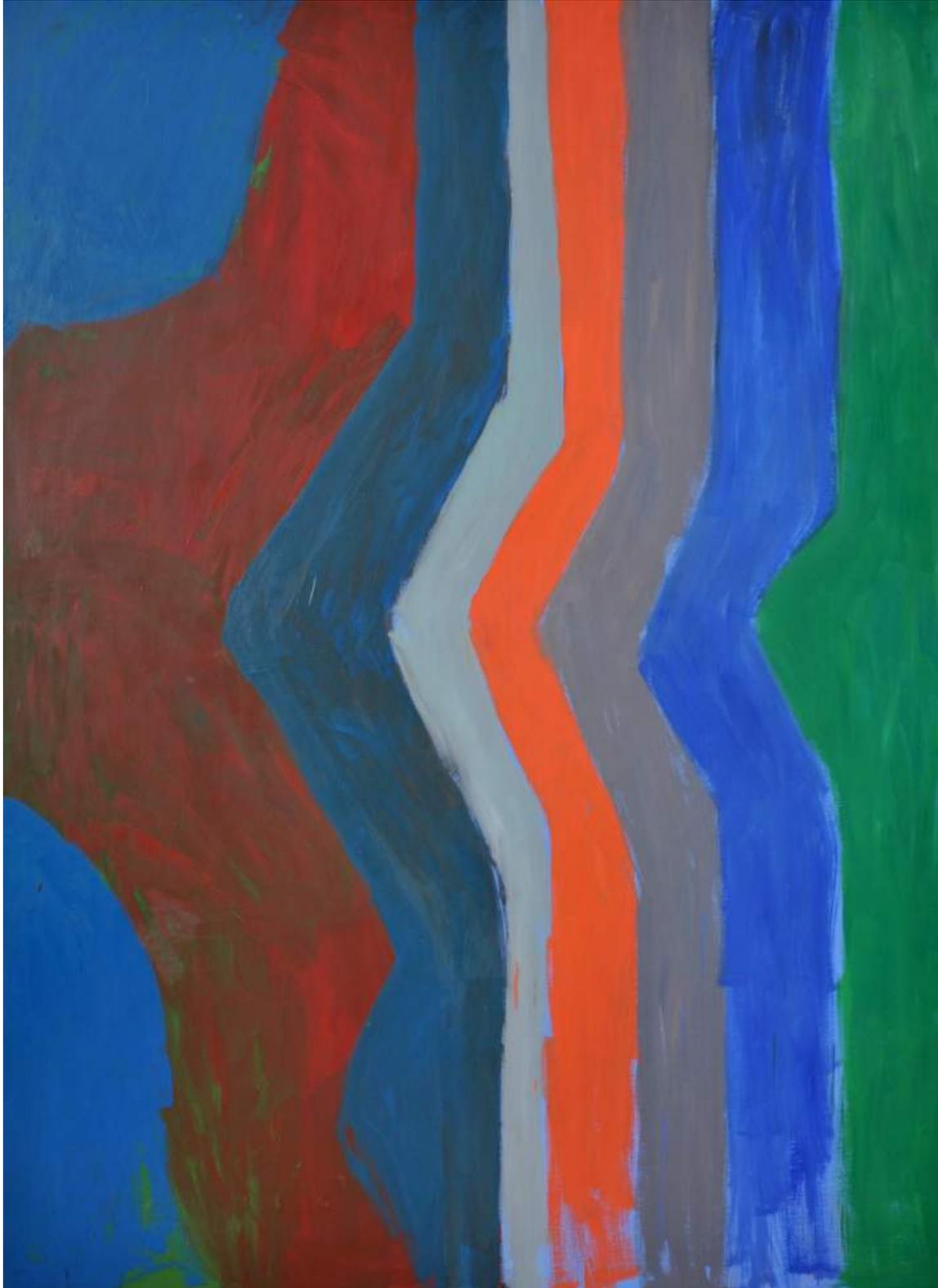
Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2001), oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches (courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, photo by Harriet Korman)

Along with eschewing the grid and other pre-established abstract formats, Korman also rejected the legacy of biomorphism, as well as hard-edged shapes, monochrome, and overdrawing, all without becoming a Minimalist or Color Field painter. As a reductive artist working without an agenda or signature style, she has defined a position in the dialogue about abstract painting that is unmistakably hers, while work by many artists that was once fashionable seems increasingly dated.

What is striking about Korman's reductiveness is how restless she has been throughout her long and distinguished career, all while steadfastly working on rectangles. For the artist, the rectangular format of a painting is not a problem (as it was to Donald Judd, for example), but rather a challenging possibility, which is perhaps why she has never worked on a shaped canvas.

As she operates in this pared-down way Korman keeps reinventing the basic building blocks of a painting, which I see as the application of line and color on a flat surface. This is her unrivaled achievement, and it delivers a bracing challenge to other artists of her generation. Refusing embellishment and personal flourishes, she does something that is seemingly impossible: within the spartan means she devises for herself in each group of paintings, she is simultaneously rigorous and loose; color, line, structure, and improvisation meld seamlessly together in unexpected ways.

These are the enduring traits of Korman's greatness, which the art world has never fully addressed, preferring signature styles and fashionable superfluties. Living and working in an age when style and content are held in higher regard than substance, she has defined and explored a solitary path in which citation, parody, the readymade, irony, and subject matter have no place. Having cleared so much out of her work, what is it that the viewer encounters when standing in front of one of her paintings? This is the question I want to address because I believe it is crucial to recognizing the nature of Korman's accomplishment.



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (1977), oil on canvas, 84 x 60 inches (courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, photo by Andreas Vesterlund)

Recently, in the self-published catalogue *Harriet Korman: Notes on Painting 1969–2019*, which the artist sent me, I came across two statements that I want to cite. In her text “2005, On Painting,” Korman stated:

What is my relationship to the surface? Covering, uncovering, changing, marking — in many ways treating the surface as a two-dimensional plane, another aspect of reality, as a sculptor would.

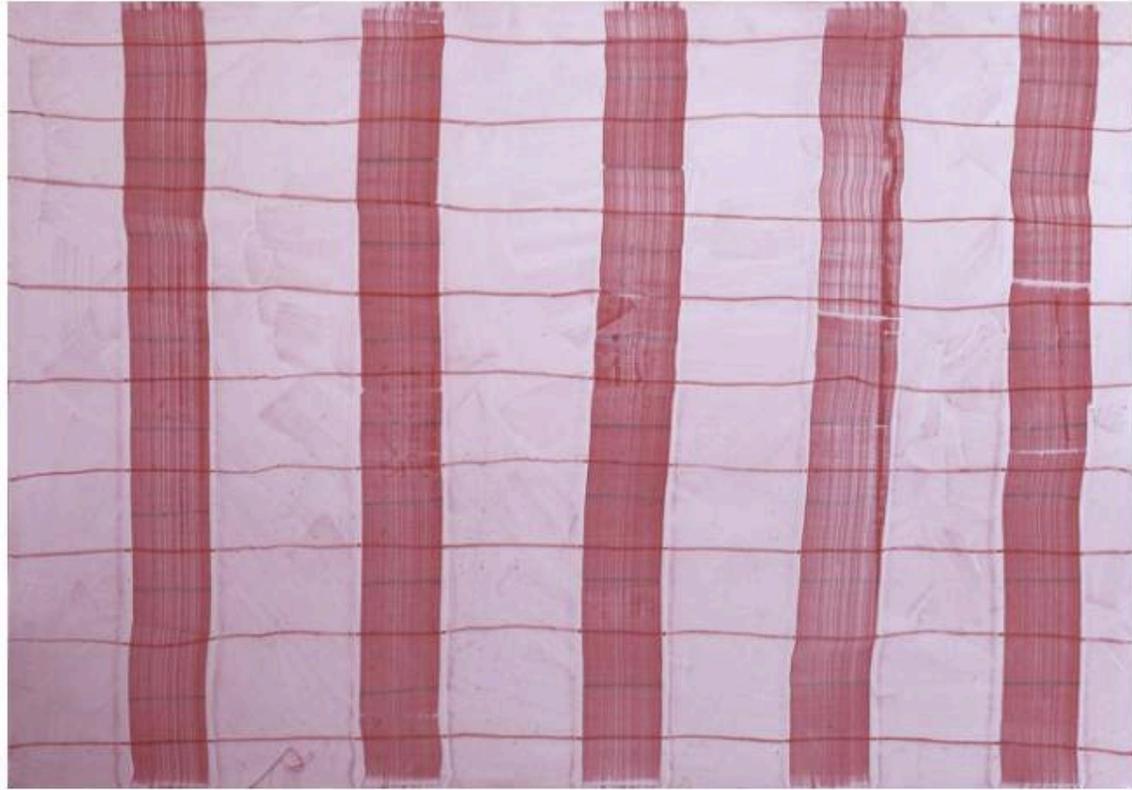
In a later note, “3 Drawings from 1971, information for a group exhibition in 2018,” on work done at the outset of her career, Korman wrote:

The painting process I became involved with was traversing the surface (drawing) side to side/edge to edge with a crayon, then covering the surface with acrylic gesso, then scraping off some of the gesso in bands with a piece of wood or trowel.

After looking through the catalogue and reading these statements, I emailed Korman and asked her if she thought what she called “process” was related to drawing. She wrote back:

Yes, the two statements are related, and could be described as relating to drawing. I am a very process-oriented painter; I get a lot out of what happens when you paint. This has a relationship to drawing in that there is a flexibility involved. I mostly started drawing with color in 2010.

Korman’s catalogue was published for a survey exhibition at her gallery, Thomas Erben, which was scheduled to open in April, but has now been delayed to the fall. It is a show that I have wanted to happen, at least since I proposed that a museum ought to give Korman’s work a long and deep look in my [review](#) of her exhibition *Harriet Korman: Line or Edge, Line or Color, New Paintings and Drawings* at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc. (September 18–November 1, 2014). A survey exhibition spanning 50 years will introduce her work to viewers who don’t know it, as well as remind her fans — of which I am one — just how exceptional her paintings and drawings are.



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (1969), acrylic, gesso, and crayon on dyed canvas, 60 x 84 inches (courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, photo by Harriet Korman)

Drawing — the most fundamental process — is at the root of Korman's practice. Although she has not shown them often, those I have seen have dazzled me. The color relationships are always unpredictable, while the mark-making is direct, flatfooted, and even clunky at times. They are eloquently terse, like the 16 words of William Carlos Williams's poem "The Red Wheelbarrow."

I never feel like Korman is trying to finesse something; that directness is carried over into her painting. Since she began painting in color, she has made works in which the majority of the interlocking shapes have curved edges. She has also incorporated a diamond motif and has divided the painting's rectangle into four equal-sized rectangles, each of which is further divided into six triangles. Each of these 24 triangles, nested within four rectangles, is defined by one color. This could become a pattern or design, but Korman never takes that route; instead, she works from one form to another.

"Focus" (oil on canvas, 48 by 60 inches, 2011) has no underlying plan to hold it together, to unify it. We see two adjacent triangles in different shades of blue, one larger than the other. Using paint straight out of the tube, she explores shifts in color

and hue. In addition to multiple red, blues, yellows, and greens, she applies various browns and mauves. Each connection we form between two or three or even four shapes will shift so there is neither a focal point nor an all-over pattern or repetition. (This is why I don't see a connection to the Gee's Bend quilt that Raphael Rubinstein made in his review of Korman in *The Brooklyn Rail*.) Rather, Korman keeps the viewer's attention shifting, which is the real and deep pleasure of the painting: it continually reveals links and differences.



Harriet Korman, "Untitled" (2016), oil on canvas, 40 x 52 inches (courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, photo by Dylan Obser)

In the exhibition Harriet Korman, Permeable/Resistant: Recent Paintings and Drawings at Thomas Erben Gallery (November 1–December 21, 2018), which I reviewed, Korman drew a centrally placed cruciform, without using a ruler or tape to determine its placement or precision.

The cross divides the painting's rectangular surface into four sets of L-shaped bands and solid-colored rectangles locked into the composition's four corners. The tension

between completeness (the crosses) and incompleteness (the rectangles tucked in the corners) causes us to see differences. At a certain point does the cross shift into four L shapes? The rectangles in the corners are not all the same size or the same color. Again, we cannot determine any underlying pattern, as the color choices seem to follow no obvious order. Structure, improvisation, and surprise are inextricable from each other.

In these cruciform paintings, Korman has come up with a structured color composition that holds its own with Ad Reinhardt's non-relational compositions in black and red. She both loosened and reimagined Reinhardt's brilliant rigidity by drawing in color. By making vibrant color compositions that address Reinhardt's black paintings, which he claimed were "the last paintings one can make," Korman challenges that endgame mentality and the various narratives that incorporate it. This is one area that makes apparent the greatness of Korman's achievement.

Korman does not focus on painting's purpose, but on process, which is connected to drawing. She has never wanted to become part of someone else's story.