



FULL CIRCLE: THE RECENT PAINTINGS OF ETHEL GITTLIN

Ethel Gittlin's new body of work, "Full Circle," emerges from the natural world, but in it reality is abstracted and transformed. The colors and patterns seem to float across each canvas like leaves on the water. Crisp, delicate and organic, the shapes are self-contained, yet in harmony with their surroundings. We may think we decipher blossoms, seeds or pods, but, on closer inspection, the brilliantly hued figures refuse to be pinned down. They are familiar, yet alien. One senses their origin in the forces of nature, but the artist's individual sensibility is clearly at work here, molding the motifs into larger, flowing patterns.

The power of these paintings lies as much in Gittlin's use of negative spaces as in her use of positive ones. While the shapes suggest organic structures, it's the space in between that defines the forms and provides them with an environment. In 17th-century Japan, Ogata Korin and his followers in the Rinpa school pioneered a subtle and sophisticated use of negative space in the sumptuous designs they painted on lacquer ware, scrolls and screens. This vision, in which the form of what is not there is as important as what is, influenced generations of Asian artists and, by the late 19th century, had spread across the globe to influence the work of the Impressionists and their descendants. That sensibility is evident in the work of Manet, Degas, Cassatt and many in the generations that followed.

Gittlin's paintings are informed by this tradition—most of all by Matisse, whose late-career paper cut outs combine a sense of spatial balance with a flattened picture plane and an audacious use of color. Produced more than 70 years ago, these deceptively simple works soon became part of the modern visual vocabulary. They paved the way for the Abstract Expressionists and other artists for whom color was the dominant language.

In her latest work, Gittlin proclaims herself part of this lineage. Her pieces live and breathe color with a rare intensity. Although they are painted on canvas, the crisply defined red, orange, blue and yellow shapes in "Exotica" and "Bon Voyage" evoke color-saturated paper cut outs. Other forms, outlined but not filled in, float in the same plane, suggesting ghostly imprints or memories of images, as if we are seeing the present and the past at once—an intimation of nature's constant flux.

In "Earth Wind" and "Alive", cobalt and cornflower blue shapes swirl across the picture plane like Van Gogh's clouds in "Starry Night." But Gittlin's tempests are not scaled to the heavens. They are close and intimate. In much of her work, it's as though a drop of Monet's pond water is viewed through a high-powered microscope.

Color rules. Blues may be punctuated by hot magentas and slivers of orange and yellow. In others, tropical pinks are tempered with greens and violets.

Nature has been inspiring artists since cave dwellers drew running animals on their walls. In Gittlin's new work, instead of admiring nature from a distance, we are immersed in it. The eye flutters over the canvas, settling here or there for a moment, then circling back. In her tumbling, vibrant shapes, the spirit of the light-filled garden is magnified by abstraction and reinvented for the new century.

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