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## Fendrich's Jewel-Like Cosmos Comes in All Shapes and Sizes

by Mario Naves

Titles can influence the way we experience a painting or sculpture, particularly one that's abstract. Because it inherently circumvents recognizable imagery, abstraction lends itself less-or at least differently-to words than representational art.

There's a marked change in how we look at a Mondrian painting if it's titled *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* or *Trafalgar Square*. One refers explicitly to itself; the other, however obliquely, to the world outside. Words don't necessarily explain (or justify) an accumulation of lines, squares, splatters or what-have-you, but they do affect, for good or ill, our response to it. (Representational art isn't altogether immune from this tendency-it's worth recalling Whistler's portrait, *Arrangement in Grey and Black: The Artist's Mother*.)

Laurie Fendrich, whose recent canvases are on display at the Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, paints heraldic shapes

cobbled together from rectangles, squares and circular forms. In other words, she's an abstract painter. Yet the titles of her paintings are adamantly referential, divulging an attraction to history, loss and groan-inducing puns: *Marcus Aurelius*, *Go West*, *No One Waltzes Anymore*, *A Frame Around Dog and Time* *Wounds All Heels*.

Ms. Fendrich's investment in words comes as no surprise: In addition to painting, she writes about art. Her articles appearing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, particularly her nuanced response to 9/11 and her rueful appraisal of art education, demonstrate a breadth of knowledge uncommon in contemporary criticism. Her extended essay, "Why Painting Still Matters," is a must-read for anyone who cares about the medium.

Her art boasts similar breadth and nuance. Though working in the tradition of geometric abstraction, Ms. Fendrich knows that utopian projects are folly and

that to essentialize form is to deny life's complexity. "The days of Kandinsky and Mondrian are over" is her blunt disavowal of the woozy spiritualism that served as inspiration-and, at times, an excuse-for the pioneers of abstraction. She's less interested in theory than in what meets the eye.

Her paintings contain a multitude of allusions, even as those allusions are buried under veils of brilliant color and bopping, quirky shapes. We may not be able to pin down why a canvas is dubbed *The Glasgow School of Art*, but the specificity indicates a reason for being. The titles aren't capricious or arbitrary. They restate and amplify the work's puzzle-like intricacy. They *fit*.

Ms. Fendrich has stated that she's inadvertently worked her way back to the 1930's, to American painters like the Park Avenue Cubists. Anyone familiar with that informal group of well-heeled sophisticates knows that a revolutionary agenda wasn't on their docket. Painters like Charles G. Shaw and Suzy Frelinghuysen took the advances of modernism and infused them with a character that is nothing if not American-bull-headed, proudly idiosyncratic and eccentric. Their efforts were powered by a certain kind of modesty: the belief that a particular mode, however revolutionary,

need not persist in radical innovation in order to develop and thrive.

Following suit, Ms. Fendrich shows that the story of art has less to do with rupture than with continuity. Her paintings may have landed themselves in the 1930's, but they aren't marooned in history. If anything, she's acutely aware of the extent to which abstraction's historical moment is over. As such, she's free to follow tangents that Mondrian and Malevich would have considered rank heresy.

Her pictures, which share constants in composition and form, achieve a broad range of characters and effects. There are subtle elisions of tone, space and shape. Large areas of color nudge and butt into each other; building-block accretions of small rectangles and squares snuggle up against them. Geometry and biomorphism share the same tilting and shifting space. Shapes verge on the cartoonish and the decorative, taking inspiration as much from Barney Google as from Art Deco ornamentation.

The craftsmanship of the paintings is impeccable. Putting brush to canvas, Ms. Fendrich doesn't delineate forms so much as patiently caress them into being. The surfaces are lustrous and smooth. The edges of shapes quietly reveal underlying layers of color and disclose decisions

made, altered, reconsidered and all but obscured. Softly scumbled outlines keep shapes in check. A "halo" of purple, icy blue and sharp lemony green surrounds a keyhole cluster of forms. No hard edges for Ms. Fendrich-her paintings disavow the absolute for a tenderly questioning give-and-take.

Willem de Kooning famously remarked that oil paint was invented to depict flesh. Ms. Fendrich reminds us that it was invented to capture light as well. Her colors are varied and rich, with sonorous tonalities. Whether glittering, earthy or approaching neon, her palette is held in balance even as it pops out at the

eye. A measure of a colorist's strength is her ability to use white as a color and not as the absence of color. Ms. Fendrich handily does just that with *The Glasgow School of Art*.

She's an unapologetic advocate of beauty over "meaning." Her jewel-like cosmos aims high, but her feet stay humbly on the ground. Utter seriousness and profound whimsy make an unlikely combination. Ms. Fendrich pulls it off with a fetching élan.

*Laurie Fendrich: Recent Paintings is at the Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, 41 East 57th Street, until Jan. 6.*