



Martha Keller *Summer Dispersion #64 o/c 39 1/2 x 37 1/2*, 1993

RESTRICTED CONSTRAINT

Bold Contradiction of Minimalism's Anti-Flourish

Martha Keller

STEPHEN ROSENBERG GALLERY

Jeanne C. Wilkinson

Not long ago Martha Keller was using a heated palette of high-noon color that has since gone over to late afternoon. While the heat is still there, the color has gone to ground, soaking into shadow like light stretching over a late Italian summer afternoon — a de Chirico dream distilled.

The paintings are composed of rectangular bands of color in distinct horizontal layers, four bands to a painting. This minimal format of rusty oranges, fierce yellow-greens, grays and blacks contains in its strict geometry no restraint or denial of the medium's corporeal origin; instead the linear divisions support the color like a skeleton supports flesh. The paint is laid on with large visible strokes in some bands, translucent, reflecting light from behind the color like in a mosaic. In other bands the color is flattened, opaqued, and stamped onto the picture plane like a Greenbergian comment.

In Keller's last body of work the color was all surface, all skin, but now the viewer's eye is led into a band of light-filled strokes that promise to reveal their source. Only a glance away, however, this vision of light is blocked by a band of solid opacity or an area of painterly darkness.

The explicit sensual directness of her work has edged into the shadows where things are not so easily seen, where a line divides not only color from color but also in close from far out, or maybe yes from no. The perfect and impenetrable surface of the modernist picture-plane no longer holds its ground but instead yields to a plane that deviates, questioning its own existence. But there is nothing tentative in this work that seems to speak of the ancient homo-sapien need to put hand to tool to surface. There is something of the caves here, from the earthy colors and darkly opaque recesses on the canvasses to an actual wall painting that the artist composed in the gallery.

This latter work was made of a multiplicity of vertical strokes from ceiling to floor, lines traveling implacably over any door, window or wall irregularity. The lines of India ink vary in tone and thickness as they move down the wall but the vertical alignment runs true, in keeping with the geometric integrity of the artist's work in general.

The place of painting in postmodern culture is at times questioned, but Martha Keller's work, instead of answering the questions, goes beyond the notion that painting (or any other act of creation for that matter) needs a cultural consensus to exist. As evidenced by this body of work, painting thrives.

Timothy Brooke

"matters of origin"

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