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Jourdan Arpelle's Divertimenti Series 1999-2003

Geometric abstraction as an international style has proved to be a remarkably durable inspiration to generations of twentieth-century artists. For nearly a hundred years painters and sculptors alike have assimilated from this non-figurative canon the ideas that have fueled the most advanced modernist art.

New York based artist Jourdan Arpelle, whose thinking has been grounded in the visual logic of pure form and color almost since she began working seriously as an artist in 1992, is one of the heirs of this vital non-objective international tradition. Reducing plastic means to an essential pictorial vocabulary, her visual syntax consists of line, form, and color alone. Arpelle's search for formal visual clarity in order to evoke a kind of cosmic awareness in the midst of the current permissive, object-surfeited, and baroque climate of contemporary culture manifests what Susan Sontag said almost forty years ago. In 1964 in her essay, "Against Interpretation," the writer and critic observed, "Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience . . . what is important now is to recover our senses. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all."

This compulsion to jettison bourgeois excess certainly drove the early twentieth century pioneers of geometric abstraction. Foremost among them were the Russian Suprematists and the members of the Dutch de Still movement, who worked out of a sense of utopian spiritual and ethical mission. In the chaotic aftermath of World War I Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Theo Van Doesberg and Piet Mondrian were driven by an urgent sense that society required a new order in art. Such pure abstraction, built on Cubist advances, marked the beginnings of a new age in painting.

For these artists and their colleagues geometric abstraction was more than a style; more than an aesthetic theory of pure art freed from the burdens of representation. Aspiring to create visually a philosophical and spiritual system,

they dreamed of shaping a utopian social order. Within a decade Constructivism had expanded into a global philosophy. One consequence, of course, was the creation of the Bauhaus (1919-1937) in Weimar in 1919.

During the politically and economically turbulent 1930s, European advanced art veered toward a more decorative kind of geometric and biomorphic abstraction, as Paris became the center for the most radical art in the run-up to World War II. That apocalyptic war shifted the center of the art world to New York City in the 1940s, as Josef Albers, Mies van der Rohe and other influential émigré artists fled to America. These major figures were catalysts for the transfer of Constructivist ideas from Europe to the United States. Artists such as Burgoyne Diller and Fritz Glarner, both founders of American Abstract Artists, began to replace energetic, fragmented forms and dynamic symmetry with simplified, more frontally oriented compositions that reflected the influence of Mondrian and Albers. Upstaged by the gestural abstraction perfected by the Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s, geometric abstraction nevertheless remained a viable vocabulary for many post-60s artists, who learned to apply the legacy of Action Painting's all-over, holistic field to their own work.

In the late 1950s, already abandoning the prevailing style of gestural abstraction dominating post war American painting, Frank Stella advocated a return to the art object and to an extreme economy of form and color, demonstrated most forcefully in his early monochromatic pinstripe paintings. His now famous deadpan statement, "What you see is what you see," paved the way for the Minimalists of the 1970s who dedicated themselves to an even more stubbornly reductive essentialist materialism.

As we know from Jourdan Arpelle's earlier work—her totemic cross sculptures, and the monochromatic "Persephone" and "Black Paintings" series—which she based on an orthogonal division of the square canvas into four sections, this artist has learned from everyone from Judd and Stella to Malevich, Rodchenko, Mondrian, Arp and Albers. Malevitch considered the black square, (which he first used in December 1913 on the curtain for the avant-garde theatrical production of "Victory Over the Sun" in St. Petersburg), as "the embryo of all possibilities—in its development it acquires a terrible strength." For this

great Russian artist the black square was an icon of nihilism as well as a symbol of utopian reform.

While Arpelle acknowledges a formal and spiritual debt to Malevich's purist icons and to his spirit of independence uncontaminated by illusionistic representation, her work contains no hint of nihilism. Instead it optimistically strives to express a higher order of clarity and order, theme and variation, in order to embody ideas of transformation through visually awakened consciousness as well as to represent via abstraction the artist's struggle to realize independence and individuality through creative power. For Arpelle the fascination of geometric forms abides in their eternal character and their universality as components of a visual language spanning and transcending all cultures. These elemental forms also can convey the idea of the transformation of the physical into the spiritual dimension.

Paramount in this artist's work is the development through carefully planned series of the relationship of geometric form and color. Her "Divertimenti" series spanned the years 1999 to 2003. Initially based on the Byzantine cross, these canvasses present with an increasing élan, a limitlessly engaging conversation between form and color variations that have increased in sophistication as the series evolved over four years. They also reflect her deepening engagement with music, alluding to the 17 short, brilliant compositions for strings, horns, flute, drums clarinet and oboe that Mozart wrote between 1771 and 1779.

In 1999, when Arpelle began work on what would become the Divertimenti series, she actually had started with an entirely different idea in mind. For this meticulous artist, who customarily proceeds with a fervent dedication to logic and precision, these paintings occurred with an unexpected spontaneity. What seemed at first a detour turned out to mark an accelerated development of the use of color and exploded forms in her work.

Always methodical, she had prepared compositional sketches and twenty-two small gessoed, 12" x 12" canvases for another series of images entirely; one composed of variants of overlapping squares, rendered in shades of grays—a series she had titled "GEIST" in advance, (her shorthand for "Ghost, Mind,

Spirit.”) ¹However along the way, something happened. She spontaneously felt compelled to compose what ended up as fourteen canvases of flattened floating squares refracted in shades of opaque, translucent and transparent reds and oranges against gray grounds. More complex color relationships were virtually forcing their way into her work.

The first five paintings in the series were completed during an intense burst of work in 1999. Between 2001 and 2002, the artist finished nine more of the small format *Divertimenti*, identifying them as the “*Divertimenti II*” series. The first of these paintings was transitional. In it she replaced the grey grounds of the initial (1999) group of images, using dark green rather than black or grey as the background color. Blacks, grays and whites were excluded in order to progress toward use of more color. This represented a bolder use of color both in terms of values and as structure than she previously had attempted. Her goal in eliminating the neutral palette of grays, blacks and whites was to make color—rather than darks and lights—function purely as structure.

In 2003, Arpelle undertook one of her most ambitious projects to date: the creation of the eight larger (38” x 38”) *Divertimenti III* paintings. Here the artist continued to transpose ideas from the musical composition to the visual. Believing that paintings can incorporate these tools, her challenge in creating the *Divertimenti III* paintings was to transform the ideas in musical composition into the realm of painting. Her thinking also finds its roots in Kandinsky’s influential observations contained in his *Concerning the Spirit in Painting*. Proclaiming the possibilities of a kind of synesthesia between abstract painting and music, he wrote in that 1914 manifesto:

“A painter, who finds no satisfaction in mere representation, however artistic, in his longing to express his inner life, cannot but envy the ease with which music, the most non-material of the arts today, achieves this end. He naturally seeks to apply the methods of music to his own art. And from this results that modern desire for rhythm in painting, for mathematical,

¹ In the millennial year 2000 Arpelle interrupted the creation of the *Divertimenti* paintings long enough to complete 17 *GEIST* paintings, this fulfilling the contract she had made with herself and producing what was a haunting presentiment of 9/11. These were conceived as a series of gray paintings with open, overlapping squares. Her intent was to convey the dematerialization of matter into spirit.

abstract construction, for repeated notes of color, for setting color in motion.

This borrowing of method by one art from another, can only be truly successful when the application of the borrowed methods is not superficial but fundamental. One art must learn first how another uses its methods, so that the methods may afterwards be applied to the borrower's art from the beginning, and suitably. The artist must not forget that in him lies the power of true application of every method, but that that power must be developed.”

Arpelle began by developing a series of four-by-four inch sketches, drawing, then rearranging, and taping them together as an accordion fold. She easily could change the sequence and alignment of the drawings to be sure the transitions between discrete canvases would work. She used the shape of the square to set up the rhythm of the paintings and the orthogonal to define the accents or “beats” that would achieve the overall abstract narrative line. Based on these carefully crafted sketches, she systematically developed a sophisticated compositional structure which produced a kind of extended dialogue among forms and colors, beats and measures, that either could be seen as one 26 foot long painting, installed vertically or horizontally, or divided with equal coherence into several horizontal and/or vertical diptychs. Says Arpelle:

“ I was still intrigued by the idea of using the symbols of the square and cross to depict an abstract idea based on a linear story line that would have a beginning, middle and end. Divertimenti III was inspired by music. In studying the flute, I had been working on compositions by Mozart, Handel, Bach, Devienne and Tellemann. I am fascinated with the compositional structure of music; by the ways in which the composers use rhythm, harmony, repetition, phrasing, key changes, directional focus, variety and instrumental conversation to convey a theme, an idea, an emotion. My challenge here was to take the idea of musical composition and transform it to a two dimensional work of art. I used the square to set up the rhythm in the paintings. I used the orthogonal to further define the beats. Red became another element of visual rhythm.”

Each of the eight 39” x 39” square (when framed) canvases of Divertimenti III, while they function independently, or interdependently, can be perceived as a “measure” in a larger 26’foot long composition. Arpelle’s deft use of color explores issues of optical contrast and grows more and more intricate. Edges begin to function as discreet shapes through unexpected and powerful color changes. Colored dividing lines intensify the optical power of the shapes they

outline. For example, in *Divertimenti III* paintings #2 and #3, an insistent olive green contrasts with maroon, and with a vibrant green-yellow that highlights individual shapes and operates like neon-bright backlighting to enliven forms. Also some of the interstitial lines are doubled, using contrasting colors for additional prismatic contrast. What began as reductive has evolved into intricate plays on theme and variation.

Throughout Arpelle's work, fiery red squares usually are associated with psychological dominance. As the *Divertimenti* paintings progressed, the artist pushed the square beyond the frame so that increasingly often only portions of it remained visible at the painting's edges. Breaking up the square became equivalent to dismantling the influence of a foreign, even hostile, force. In the process the artist exercised her creative power to objectify the square. In *Divertimenti III*, paintings # 6 and 7, for example, the square finally virtually disappears. The link between these two paintings is a strong, feminine pink that becomes the focal point. This color is optically contrasted by the lime-yellow of the final canvas, # 8, a sort of grand finale to the final series. In *Divertimenti III*, #8 the square reappears but in a more detached state. It has been transformed from a subject into an object over which the artist has gained an elegant control.

All three parts of the entire *Divertimenti* series are linked through their texture, form, and color inclusions and exclusions and via increasingly intricate facets of opaque and transparent color as edges become shapes in themselves. The vitality of the *Divertimenti* paintings reveals a satisfying evolution in Arpelle's work, as she demonstrates mature skill in manipulating her increasingly complex formal vocabulary. Carrying forward the resilient traditions of geometric abstraction, she has allowed static perfection to blossom into a more dynamic interplay between broken forms, diagonal flow, and harmonies and dissonances of vibrant color as well as furthering her exploration of the powers of rigorous abstraction to explore the spiritual and transformational power of art.