

Pure Shapes Are Images of Thought:
Jourdan Arpelle's Vivace Series, 2005-2006

By Alexandra Anderson-Spivy

Before the artist Jo Baer created her unforgettable paintings with white centers and black borders in the 1970s, she once asked, "Was it possible to create a vital painting that did not depend in any way on illusion, content or even quality of mark, that was about its own architecture, its actual physical structure, yet did not cross the line into sculpture?"ⁱ

With "Vivace," the series of works she completed during 2005 and 2006, Jourdan Arpelle rises to the challenge laid down by Jo Baer thirty years ago. Arpelle's recent paintings represent a forward leap in the artist's visual thinking. The "Vivace" paintings engage long-abiding issues of non-gestural, geometric abstraction that formerly fueled much passionate artistic debate: what is the nature of the interrelation of pictorial edge and field, of color and composition, of flatness versus volume, of dynamism versus tranquility and the object-hood of painting as opposed to the pursuit of realistic depiction?

"Vivace" is the specific directive indicating to a musician that the piece he or she is attempting should be played "in a lively fashion". It also generally means "brisk, sprightly, vivacious, or gay". And, of course, the musical term derives from the Latin word for life (thus we have "vivacious"). The artist suggests that the black and white areas in the recent "Vivace" paintings are comparable to the continuo of a string quartet or quintet. The bass provides the resonant underlying rhythm that never fails while the colors, analogous to the clear soprano voices of the violins, soar and intertwine above this steadfast cadence.

Not only does the series title for the paintings alert us to the artist's ongoing interest in the process of transmuting musical structures to visual art; it also reveals her affirmation of the life force as embodied in art. Her usage of the cross gathers meaning from the earliest written symbols. She continues to make the most of the cruciform shape that has underpinned her work ever since her

initial use of the orthogonal in her early monochromatic sculpture. It also is found previously in the Constructivist paintings of Piet Mondrian, Ilya Bolotovsky, and in Agnes Martin's more recent poetic, gridded compositions; these three modern and contemporary artists are among those who considered the grid to be the most perfectly abstract of all compositional devices.

Mondrian's late paintings have had a major influence on Arpelle's thinking. His compositions with crossed black lines create an optical effect that is sometimes described as the "blue flickers". The retina perceives each juncture of the lines as a square, vibrating in the color blue. This retinal response occurs with dramatic result in "Broadway Boogie Woogie", his great 1942-43 homage to American jazz. You could say that in her new work Arpelle reverses Mondrian's recipe. In the "Vivace" paintings she is using color on the edges and black and white in the interior.

Furthermore, Arpelle has been able to further refine and animate her Constructivist-based visual syntax in the "Vivace" paintings. They constitute an ambitious intellectual advance; one that has enabled her to employ black and white passages and color contrasts to produce distinct, highly refined retinal and optical effects. Optimism, liveliness, and an accomplished technical control suffuse these canvases in a way that demonstrates the artist's increasing confidence in her use of color as structure.

The "Vivace" series is composed of two distinct parts. Part one consists of 24 smaller canvases (20 inches square unframed; 21 inches square framed). Part two, "Vivace Molto", is made up of seven larger canvases: two pairs and three solo works, with dimensions that vary from 65 x 49 inches to 79 x 37 inches (framed)—all larger than human scale. Welded metal frames with black reveals are essential elements in the successful presentation of the paintings in both parts of the series.

One of the indicators that an artist's work is worth watching over time is whether or not a consistent development of coherent ideas underlies the work, however much stylistic changes may occur. Another is whether or not an artist displays a tenacious ability to persevere and an appetite for taking risks.

Breakthroughs in art frequently occur as a consequence of prolonged and determined experimentation.

Arpelle's small "Vivace" paintings, executed in 2005, grew out of earlier color studies in which she was exploring a specific compositional vocabulary using the colors extracted from a close study of Matisse, whose painting "The Piano Lesson", remains a touchstone in her thinking. Many of these studies were destroyed. But she put aside one particular canvas that then served as the basis of an experiment. The colored edges, inspired by color changes in "The Piano Lesson" were saved. But she re-gessoed, sanded down, and repainted the center of the painting with bold black and white shapes on the grid. This fortuitous experiment became the anchor for the "Vivace" series.

For Arpelle, black is a "sculptural color" as well as a visual signifier of the unknown. The black and white canted rectangles, which now take center stage in these compositions, grew out of the orthogonals that defined the previous "Black X", "Geist", and the "Divertimenti" paintings. These crossed lines now have become strongly contrasting planes. The shapes that emerged added to Arpelle's new paintings a dynamic strength caused by the tension inherent in the optical vibrations that the juxtaposition of black and white—intensified dark and light—creates. The intersections of those shapes create a real visual sizzle. The syncopated graphic rhythms and vectors created by the expanding and contracting orthogonals provide vibrant power and a velocity to the abstract compositions. The color contrasted passages that have migrated to the canvas's edges and corners now anchor the paintings while vivid black and white centers give them visual muscle. The blacks are painted using horizontal strokes in a semi-gloss finish and the whites are painted in a matte surface, providing effective textural contrasts.

While the 24 smaller "Vivace" canvases stand on their own as individual paintings, they successfully launched the larger works, propelling the artist to make taller and broader paintings entailing more ambitious combinations of format. The paintings, large and small alike, exploit optical and retinal effects. They resonate with reverberating retinal after-images, created primarily by the juxtaposition of black and white, and secondarily by the colored borders and

corners. The borders are often doubled and tripled to purposefully raise the potential vibrational volume through carefully chosen color combinations that create simultaneous contrast. Almost without fail, a third structural element, the colored corners, (often the smallest area of color in the painting), exert the strongest frequencies by succinctly fusing the other elements. The interaction of color as it plays against the contrast of black and white animates every detail of the compositions. The white areas, when lit, tend to expand beyond their boundaries, creating a kind of halo effect that, in turn, affects every color they adjoin. The juxtaposition with white makes the colors glow. The black areas, in contrast, are enriched and deepened in their inky depths by both the contiguous areas of colors and their placement next to white.

Optical science defines this effect as the "negative of the second derivative". This term describes the complex retinal reaction (which is perceptual, not strictly physical) produced by optimal contrasts created by the specific adjoining colors. This means that when a color touches both black and white, the eye will perceive the black side as much blacker, and the white side as much whiter. As also happened in Jo Baer's paintings, light is transmitted into this color line both from the white and the black areas of the painting. Arpelle's colored borders and contrasts actually fluoresce.

Color, redeployed and emboldened from her earlier adventure with Matisse gives to each image additional level of pulsation that provides a vivid counterpoint to the rhythms of black and white structural shapes. In her sometimes doubled and even tripled borders and corners Arpelle deftly contrasts reds, oranges, pinks and different shades of yellow against powder blues, turquoises, sky blues, acidic and grass greens. The vibrational dance, or what that master of symphonies of incredibly subtle whites, American painter Robert Irwin, called the "hum" of the picture—created by these color contrasts at the edges, interacts across and around the entire composition of each canvas.

In the seven "Vivace Molto" paintings the artist has defined each canvas via a monochromatic arch that increases visual vibration within the tight gradations of the spectrum. Here audacious geometric forms meet in a compressed way that intensifies optical effects. These works are at once large and

intimate. Their scale and composition dominate a room. Yet the tiny details of color on the edges and corners draw the viewer in. These corner details burst with surprise and enliven the overall space of the picture. These larger works also perceptually bridge the divide between paintings and sculpture. For the most part, the larger forms read as mass, indirectly referring to Richard Serra's early, leaning steel plates and to Tony Smith's massive black Minimalist sculpture from the 1960s. They even refer back to "Abstract Symbols", Arpelle's early series of black sculpture.

In the pairs of "Vivace Molto" paintings (#26 & #27 as well as #28 & #29), adjacent hues collide, separated but interconnected, resting side by side in their paired frames. The artist revisits the implication of pairs she first explored in her "Double Cross" sculpture. Now the pairs are paintings. Each unit is a complete and singular entity enlarged and empowered by its mate. These pairings are a metaphor for relationship; for the idea of keeping one's essential self while joining with another.

"Vivace Molto # 30" possesses a monumental tranquility created by the massive black canted form dominating the picture. The edges are rendered in shades of pink with the brightest red and hot orange as a counterpoint. One green and three blue-green corners mediate the spectral color variations. "Vivace Molto # 25" (65 inches square unframed; 66.5 inches square, framed or 168.9 cm. square, framed) vastly enlarges ideas first explored within the smaller "Vivace" canvases. It balances three sides of the squared composition with two cool blues and a green that faces orange, blue's complimentary color. The green is enlivened by two distinctly different shades of red, which bring life to the green border while interacting across the entire canvas to animate the overall image. Through such sophisticated color structure, the methodical and systematic clarity of Arpelle's canvases energizes classical geometric abstraction.

This is not an easy task. As that champion of formalism, critic Clement Greenberg, observed in the seminal essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", published in 1961 in his book Art and Culture,

"In turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it upon the medium of his

own craft. The non-representational or “abstract,” if it is to have aesthetic validity, cannot be arbitrary and accidental, but must stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original. This constraint, once the world of common, extroverted experience has been renounced, can only be found in the very processes or disciplines by which art and literature have already imitated the former [extroverted experience]. These [processes] themselves become the subject of art and literature.”ⁱⁱ

The result, in the case of Arpelle’s “Vivace” series, is paintings of considerable formal variety, subtle effect, and beauty, which deliver an emotional impact even in their restraint. These canvases reward their viewers with a feeling of wholeness engendered by a certain refinement in proportion and execution, reminding us that purist abstraction can still function as a vehicle for authentic and satisfying artistic polemic.

ⁱ Art in America, Judith Stein Interview with Jo Baer, 1993

ⁱⁱ Clement Greenburg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, Art and Culture, page 6., Beacon Press, 1961.

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