

MARC STRAUS



BETTINA BLOHM

by Jonathan Goodman
December 18, 2014

MARC STRAUS GALLERY | OCTOBER 26 – DECEMBER 12, 2014

German-born, Berlin- and New York-based artist Bettina Blohm paints gouache and acrylic works that rely on their lyricism to affect the viewer. Her designs are simple but never simplistic; the resolutely abstract works may stem, as she puts it, from “something seen,” but she takes care to “collect visual ideas” and produces colorful, emotionally compelling paintings through rhythm and repetition. While her art can come close to whimsy, and her abstraction shows that she is a good student of the New York School, there remains in her paintings a possibly European-based restraint, which gives them a certain seriousness even when they are light-hearted to a high degree. Indeed, the tension between earnest intention and whimsical enthusiasm is central to her art.

Natural-seeming expressions of design are regularly found in Blohm’s paintings. Grids are a recurring visual pattern, though the artist typically skews right angles in favor of something more off-balance. Blohm also often works in a serial fashion, repeating themes in slight variations. There is a reason she produces art that is cognizant of both American and European abstraction, for her style is indicative of three decades of living in New York as well as her experience in Munich as a student and, presently, her long stays in Berlin.

An ardent believer in painting, Blohm works at a time when the genre is being questioned, although there are signs that painting is undergoing a revival, as it always does when writers and curators are pronouncing its death. Blohm knows that there will always be a place for painting in art, even if it is no longer considered the most advanced means of visual communication. Her engagement with drawing—an activity she emphasizes when she is in Europe—and painting shows us that it is still possible to find artists committed to the by-now-long tradition of abstraction, whose basic attributes of line and color are handled extremely well by the artist.

Thus, Blohm may be understood as a perceptive student of painting’s legacy, mostly because she sees herself as working within a continuum rather than inside an abyss. Additionally, she makes a strong argument for a nearly pure abstraction, saying that she goes “back and forth between order and freedom, gesture and shape, clean and rough borders.” In some ways, abstract art has never been so vulnerable as now, in the face of advances in high-tech art and a general reliance on a conceptual approach. Actually, if it is in fact true that painting is moribund—the statement can be debated—this may be the moment to restate its ability to reify intuition and idea.

It is evident that Blohm herself is determined to follow the footsteps of some great painters. I think that Matisse is particularly an influence on Blohm; his lyricism as a painter is echoed in the grace of her nonrepresentational forms. The viewer can experience her expertise in a moving painting entitled “Memories” (2014), which consists of a grid of 30 dark blue squares, each with a white line rendering a

MARC STRAUS

balloon-like shape whose interior is gray or blue or a mixture of the two hues. It is a terrific presentation of what remains alive within us—what carries us beyond the forgetfulness of life lived only in the present. “Procrustian Physics” (2014) presents a composition organized according to a skewed, diagonally aligned grid. Its white lines don’t quite match up but provide a real contrast to the raven blue ground behind them. Articulating space to the edges of the canvas, the grid barely fits into the work’s dimensions.

“Diagram 1” (2014), part of a sequence undertaken in the last two years, could not be more direct: it consists of a gray gouache background, divided more or less evenly by vertical lines. Toward the bottom of these lines are open circles, composed with a slightly black line. The weight thus brings the eyes downward over the canvas, where there is a pleasing sense of articulated order. The vertical lines give the open circles a coherent sense of place. Finally, “Diagram 8”(2014) is composed of thin black lines that build an open architecture-like structure, with pentimenti hovering just beneath them. The image could well be inspired by the Bauhaus, whose elevated design Blohm may be following. It is a quietly beautiful painting, mysterious in its serenity and calm. Blohm considers these paintings part of a group, despite the fact that they are not always stylistically similar.

Here and again the artist demonstrates an uncommon hand, one in keeping with her sense that the paintings should maintain their own internal rules. This enables Blohm to explore a world saturated in color that is being supported by the linear elements in her art. The works are easy to like, but they also demand extended study to be understood. Like Japanese zen koans, the paintings are exquisite conundrums, puzzles that introduce themselves quietly into the viewer’s consciousness. In this work Blohm conveys a playfully open world, but also one that is inventively structured. Indeed, her whimsy is most often offset by sincere motivation, which elevates her art.