

Laurie Fendrich: Recent Paintings, *Catalog Essay*

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Laurie Fendrich's work always surprises me. Most of the time things are not quite what they seem to be and in the rare event that they are what they seem, they turn out to provoke complex and even contradictory associations. For all their obvious clear-headedness, her radiant geometric paintings prove to be more subtle and layered—in every sense of the word—than you suspect when you first encounter them.

For example, Fendrich's visual language and the intimate scale of her pictures make it plain that she has deliberately entered into a dialogue with the tradition of modernist abstraction (and more specifically with the branch of modernist abstraction rooted in Russian constructivism and American "non-objective" painting of the early 20th century) but it is equally plain that her side of the conversation is tinged with neither nostalgia nor irony. Her paintings are both whole-hearted and playful, anchored equally in the high-minded modernist conviction that "pure" relationships of shape and color can be deeply expressive and in the entirely current belief that contemporary culture, with all its raucousness, cannot be excluded from even the "purest" of formal relationships.

Confronted by one of Fendrich's recent paintings, you begin to consider the permutations of her evident admiration for her chosen Russian ancestors. Remembering that many of the most inventive painters of the revolutionary generation were women, you study Fendrich's elegant, vigorous configurations, think about Goncharova, Popova, and their colleagues, wonder whether there's anything visibly feminist in Fendrich's approach, and then discover that this train of thought is interrupted by cacophonous overtones of the present day vernacular, with a nod at that most American of modernist painters, Stuart Davis (himself a connoisseur of both High Art and the colloquial). Pop culture echoes begin to declare themselves, without obscuring Fendrich's allegiance to high modernism. A strange, latent anthropomorphism begins to animate her severe geometric shapes. Occasional ovals and curves acquire enormous

importance, suggesting schematic references to the body. But it's fleeting. The pictures settle into abstractness again and you return to savoring the play of non-associative angle against non-specific curve, of lush hue against lush hue.

Fendrich is, of course, fully aware of these ambiguities and even courts them. "I don't set out to make cartoonish shapes, but I'll let them come in," she says, in a conversation about her contradictory imagery. "Pop culture energy can be invigorating. It's part of my awareness of living today in New York."

I've tried to track the wordless process of experiencing Fendrich's pictures to underscore what is obvious: that she is a conspicuously intelligent, knowledgeable artist, unselfconscious about her understanding of the past, and certainly not weighed down by it. But this is not to suggest that Fendrich's pictures are theoretical demonstrations of any kind. Quite the contrary. Their impact—and ultimately, their meaning—is bound up with their immediate physical power, with color, edges, touch, surface, the tension between the hand and near-mechanical imagery, and all the rest of it. Once again, Fendrich keeps you off-balance. As you approach her paintings, the crisp edges of her shapes disclose delicate "escapes" of underlying layers of color. These serve both as a chromatic counterpoint to the main hues of the canvas and as "drawing" at a different scale from the large, assured gestures that delimit the shapes. Similarly, the apparently uninflected surfaces of the shapes begin, with closer acquaintance, to reveal evidence of brushmarks and the hand. This layering, the faint traces of the process of making—of spreading pigment across a surface—like those ephemeral suggestions of present day street culture, make you rethink your initial perceptions of the paintings. As your eye adjusts to the nuances of Fendrich's images, their disembodied geometry transforms itself into a robust material presence.

This, it goes without saying, is no accident. The hand, a disciplined touch, and all the rest of the traditional arsenal of painter's skills all play a major role in these pictures. "I love putting paint on," Fendrich says. "I never use tools or straight edges; it's all my hand. I'm very proud of being able to make an oval or a curve and I love doing it. I'm aiming for perfection—a kind of perfection. Of course, the paintings are imperfect, but I accept that."

Fendrich's quest for "perfection" is evidently a very personal one, based not on verifiable absolutes, but on intuitive resolutions. The shapes with which she constructs her images are never the familiar, recognizable figures of Euclidian geometry, but instead, unprecedented planes whose intricacies defy categorization. The ovals that she imposes against her straight edged shapes—a relatively new addition to her visual lexicon—create still more complexities and still more unpredictable configurations. Large structures of abutting shapes tip and slide against the rectangle of the canvas. It's clear that the images are reined in by a potent sense of underlying order, but the logic of the system remains elusive. In the same way, the connections between apparently related compositions remain impossible to describe. You sense that there is some sort of family resemblance among a group of pictures—something about the general arrangement of large shapes—but shifts in hue and in the way blocks of color cluster and interlock, along with small changes in proportion and interval, irrevocably alter the pulse and rhythm of the resulting image.

In the end, what may define the character of Fendrich's work most strongly—and is certainly its most surprising aspect—is color. (She is an eloquent orchestrator of black and white in her drawings, as well, but that's another matter.) Her palette is as unnamable, as willed, and as inventive as her vocabulary of shapes. My notes on a group of recent paintings itemize such improbable chroma as "pinks, weird mauves, black-greens, flicks of off-reds, dull teals." Another entry specifies "absinthe green, supersaturated ultramarine, plastic toy magenta." An underlying sense of harmony prevails—there are no overt dissonances—but everything seems a little off. Fendrich's hues are paradoxically limpid and impure, at the same time, their difficult personalities and complicated relationships further enriched and modulated by the "escapes" of contrasting colors at the edges of her shapes. Nothing is quite what it seems.

None of this declares itself rapidly. Fendrich's paintings, for all their graphic clarity and seductive color, take time to make their real virtues known. It's worth spending that time. Her idiosyncratic images test the limits of perception at the same time that they make us exercise our intelligence.

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