

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Artforum
Marina Adams, Salon 94
Barry Schwabsky
1 September 2019

ARTFORUM

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Image: View of “Marina Adams,” 2019. From left: OZ, 2018; Days and Nights, 2018; Cheops, 2018

“Anemones,” will likely be remembered as the one that cemented her reputation as among the best abstract painters around. In particular, with the six large canvases in the gallery’s main space (seven small ones were in its upstairs reception area) she used scale to achieve something that’s been rare in contemporary painting: a sense of grandeur that is not in the least solemn, but is lively and high-spirited. To do this, she’s benefited from the same lesson that Henri Matisse retrospectively drew from the experience of Fauvism: that “the quantity of color was its quality.” But quantity is not the only tool Adams employs for intensifying hues that are not necessarily bright but are instead highly saturated—even her browns can pack a punch. I realized this when I saw a gallery visitor don her sunglasses to take a longer look at the most recent of the small works on view, the darkly searing *SongLines 12*, 2019, in which the artist uses complementary contrasts to push deep colors toward paradoxically shadowy brilliance. Color is just about everything in Adams’s work, and everything seems animated, in movement. The energy impelling this motion is never agitated or frantic but rather feels steady, relaxed, and spontaneously responsive. Viewing her work is like being in the passenger seat next to a driver who knows how to take the road with supreme dexterity and implicit attentiveness; you feel safe at any speed.

The sense of mobility that encompasses every element in the paintings makes it seem misleading to speak of composition, as the term implies a definitive placement of each thing in relation to the others. With Adams, every form is flexing itself, ready to expand or contract in response to what the others are doing, wrapped up in some larger process that also involves the viewer’s perceptions and responses. The figures in these paintings can be loosely geometrical—roughly triangular or lozenge-shaped—and are sometimes biomorphic. In either case, they are not predetermined by their edges, but grow from the inside out. These edges are bounded by differently hued bands substantial enough to impose themselves, strangely enough, as autonomous color areas. In this way, Adams sidesteps the age-old dichotomy between color and drawing; likewise, her color concept incorporates facture, which appears as inseparable from the highly specific, richly inflected hues she achieves. Any given expanse of color is full of subtle modulations, thanks to translucent layering and varied paint application. Color isn’t flat—it does not simply reassert the plane. It has body and possesses a dimensionality of its own that has nothing to do with depicted volume.

For me, the most impressive of the big canvases was *Cheops*, 2018, named after the pharaoh who built the great pyramid of Giza, which is clearly echoed in the work’s triangular forms. More to the point,

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though, is that the monarch's necropolis was for millennia the world's tallest architectural structure: There is an inexorable rising movement to this painting that conveys an almost dizzying sense of aspiration to the heights.