

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

## Marina Adams: *Wild Is Its Own Way*

William Whitney

Marina Adams' compositions toggle between simplicity and refined mastery, exploring colour, form and movement in a manner reflective of a painter comfortable in her own skin, yet increasingly conscious of a world that is faster paced than it has ever been. Out of the eight paintings exhibited in the second part of the artist's two-part debut solo exhibition, *Wild Is Its Own Way*, seven were painted during New York's Covid-19 lockdown. In this body of work, Adams re-emphasises the need for time and space – not away from others, but within oneself – in order to grow. With the constant onslaught of a heavily digitalised world, Adams' artistic practice seeks to create space in a manner that can alleviate the pervasive presence of the digital, technological culture that continues to fill our brains no matter how full they already are. Her paintings reflect such a space. In her 2019 interview with The Brooklyn Rail, she discussed the role of her world view in her practice: "Thinking about the world in terms of energy, as an energetic space, really interests me, and it plays into my thinking about what I'm doing here in the studio – what I'm putting into the world and how I'm trying to communicate."<sup>i</sup>

At first glance, Adams' paintings seem to directly reflect the rapidly changing and challenging times the world is currently experiencing – in her choice of titles as well as in her abundant use of shifting hues and shapes. However, sit with one of these works for a minute or two and the soft curvature of the lines slowly calms the eyes and the mind. In 'Atlas' Wife', 2019, one can soak up the soothing lavender purple on the bottom left or the delicate sage green across from it, without any interference from the large warm brown lines, which ebb from top to bottom tying the colours together. The structure of the lines works almost like a puzzle, delineating which colour fits where, while allowing a steady harmony between each and its neighbour. The linear structure itself presents its own geometric identity when properly focused on, while co-existing within the painting – neither dominating the space, nor fading into the background amidst the vibrant shapes drawn into the work.

Adams' approach feels steady, as she sketches the basic composition of an artwork prior to experimenting with line and colour's different uses. She is clearly comfortable with her painterly language, eager to put something out into the world, but still clear-eyed enough to recognise that not everything can be planned for: "Sometimes it takes time not only to see, but to get over the ideas of what you want", she says of 'Atlas' Wife', the only painting completed before lockdown and quarantine began. Using the different colour and line combinations, along with gestural brushstrokes, Adams conjures up a world of her own making, something that references ancient structures such as the pyramids, while the coloured shapes remain within the realm of universality. Abstract painting, at its essence, is the display of thought without written word. Because of this, the title bestowed on a work takes on a crucial role, giving guidance about a particular artwork and/or the artist who created it. This is especially true for Adams in this exhibition, as she pulls titles from classical novels, such as 'Native Sun', 2020, displaying a sharp use of double entendre, and introducing herself to viewers as a perspicacious painter deeply aware of the power of words, offering just enough clues into who she is outside of the studio in order to hint at who she is within. While speaking about her work previously, Adams has

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referenced painting as a magic of sorts, and the title 'Atlas' Wife' sits within that same trajectory, delving into Greek mythology and calling into question who is deemed of importance and why. Atlas is a Titan – father to the Greek gods – who is best known in modern times for his portrayal in the myths of Hercules and Perseus. His wife, the nymph Pleione, is rarely mentioned and little is known about her. Who was she? Perhaps that's the point... Adams' title is a tongue in cheek reflection on who is considered strong and what true strength might genuinely look like. The title also serves as reminder of how far feminism has come, and how far there still is to go before equality is truly accomplished.

Hung in conversation with 'Atlas' Wife' is 'RBG', 2020, both works are 223.5 x 198 cm (88 x 78 in), and while 'Atlas' Wife' is equally about the structure as it is about the colours, 'RBG' is a quilt-like blend of warm yellows, delightful burgundy and inviting greys. Among the warmer relaxed hues is a vivacious Yves Klein blue diamond just below the centre of the canvas, adding a burst of energy to the otherwise tranquil composition. 'RBG' could very well stand for red, blue and green, but the title also pays tribute to the brilliant, notorious, feminist Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg who passed away when Adams was painting the work. In a similar fashion to Justice Ginsburg's mild-mannered yet forceful voice, many of the geometrically shaped colours in 'RBG' are most compelling in their quietude. Adams' use of colour in this painting feels relaxed and graceful, creating space within the shapes in order to slow things down. This is not a fast-paced race car eager to rev its engine on the fast track to success, but rather a slow and graceful horse trot on the road to recovery, steady, unfaltering and determined, acutely aware that the journey may take some time and that that is alright.

Although drawing inspiration from great painters of previous generations, such as Paul Cézanne, Alma Thomas, Joan Mitchell and Ellsworth Kelly, Adams' work is decidedly her own. Nothing in the paintings feels forced or tense. Her works remain confident and fluid, and while they don't appear easy, they move with an acquired ease that suggests an intensive studio practice. 'X Factor', 2020 – the last work in the front gallery – is also the smallest at 101.6 x 89 cm (40 x 35 in). Again, Adams presents a series of blues, browns and yellows, however, this time the colours don't just sit next to each other but also within each other, creating an intertwinement as a dark green triangle is situated inside a larger yellow one, while a fierce purple line drips ever so slightly onto the aquamarine blue triangle within. Drips do occasionally occur in Adams' work, as if a reminder that these are not perfectly formatted digital images, and no matter how gracefully she is able to have the colours overlap and form shapes around each other, her paintings reflect a sense of deeply rooted calm that can be lacking in the era of Internet addiction.

'Lady Day', 2020, one of the six artworks in the second gallery at Stephen Friedman, references the nickname that American jazz musician Lester Young, also known simply as 'Pres', gave to the great singer Billie Holiday, highlighting her class and elegance faced with government persecution for her willingness to speak truth to power. Two expressive light blue lines, each differing slightly in colour, size and shape, descend the canvas in a winding pattern, while a dynamic hunter green occupies the gap between them, resembling an ancient Egyptian or Japanese vase. On the other side of each blue line, Adams has interjected more geometric shapes, adding a

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liveliness to the work reminiscent of Holiday's fluctuating vocal pitches, each colour resonating with a different vocal note in Holiday's repertoire.

*Wild Is Its Own Way* astutely displays Adams' ability to probe and interact with the unknown, cementing her practice as one that reflects an appreciation for the canon of Western painting, while simultaneously adhering to Eastern practices of meditation and energy restoration. Each painting is unique, opening up new pathways for energetic consumption, while freeing the mind of a tension that is so routinely overlooked, and of which viewers only become aware once it has been relieved. Collectively, Adams' paintings rejuvenate the spirit through a masterful use of colour and sense of motion and space. *Wild Is Its Own Way* – an elegant title highlighting Adams' willingness to challenge the singularity of meaning – is a powerful introduction into Adams' artistic practice, which takes viewers down a path they might have not noticed otherwise. Her paintings bypass the fork in the road entirely, instead choosing to go straight ahead, unearthing an ancient, forgotten energy in the process that underpins Adams' position as one of the most important painters of her generation.

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<sup>1</sup> 'In Conversation: Marina Adams with Alex Bacon', The Brooklyn Rail, June 2019, available at <https://brooklynrail.org/2019/05/art/MARINA-ADAMS-with-Alex-Bacon> (accessed 18 July 2021).