

FRAN SHALOM

AMBIGUOUS CHARACTERS

# Fran Shalom

## *Ambiguous Characters*

With an essay by John Yau

New Paintings

September 17 – October 9, 2016

John Davis Gallery  
362½ Warren St  
Hudson, NY 12534  
518 828 5907



*On the Verge*, 2016  
Oil on panel, 20 x 24 inches

### *Ambiguous Creatures and More*

When Fran Shalom was in her early 20s and living in San Francisco, she began practicing Zen Buddhism, which emphasizes meditation and the importance of intuition. Two years later, she went to Japan and spent time in a Zen monastery. This is what Shalom wrote about her Zen Buddhism in an email she sent me:

It informs how I approach a new painting, with a wholehearted openness, and with what is called: "beginner's mind." In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few.\*

It struck me that Shalom was defining her painting practice as a form of active meditation, a way of searching for forms seen by the mind, an amalgamation of memory and imagination. At the same time, I was reminded of the mystery writer Janwillem van de Wetering's memoir, *The Empty Mirror: Experiences in a Japanese Zen Monastery* (1973). One of the strongest impressions that book made on me came from the author's recounting of the monks' wise humor and gentle jokes, which seemed to be their manner of suggesting another way of seeing and understanding.

Shalom paints on wood panels. The paint is generally thin, seldom thicker than a tight, sensuous skin. If she feels as if she has reached a dead end, she will begin another painting on top of what she has done. At the same time, she doesn't make a show of the process or accentuate the number of times she has restarted a painting; there is none of that self-trumpeting in her work. In an artist's statement, which other writers have cited, Shalom states:

It is a search for clarity and humor, as is evidenced by the shapes and colors in my paintings: cartoony, bright, blobby.

Many of Shalom's shapes have rounded edges, like the backsides of cartoon creatures. Despite our inability to place a name on these forms, they are not meant to be threatening or frightening. In fact, something close to the opposite happens. They invite close looking and become – in my experience of them – something to meditate on. Shalom further complicates our experience of her paintings by giving them associative titles. By pairing a title like *Nice Nelly* or *Dememeanor* (both 2015) with an abstract painting, she invites us to find a relationship between the two. While such a pairing can become a disaster, especially if we are looking for a one-to-one relationship or a literal connection, Shalom recognizes that the paintings, to cite the poet Wallace Stevens, "must resist the intelligence/Almost successfully." Why "almost," you ask? It is because Stevens wasn't interested in obscurity, nor did he tolerate clichés to depict the intangible.

Shalom is too earthly a painter to focus on signs to suggest transcendence. Her paintings begin in things, the palpable world, even as they journey into a domain where they resist the associations she has accorded them, and defy being reduced to a metaphor. Can we see things for what they are, even if we cannot name them, cannot in that regard have dominion over them? The question seems both aesthetic and ethical, which is the strength of these paintings. They don't become a surrogate for something, a symbol. Take the painting *On the Verge* (2016) and the fact that the artist has titled the exhibition *Ambiguous Characters*. There is a red form in the shape of an L; it has been inverted so that it rises, like an abstract animal's head, from a blue band spanning the bottom of the painting. Another shape in the form of an L, which is made of orange rectangles outlined in blue, runs down most of the red shape's right side and along its bottom edge until it extends into what we might read as the red L's neck.

I see *On the Verge* as a delicious visual paradox. On one hand, you can read the shape as a cartoon beast with large teeth, but that ignores too much of what does not fit into that humanizing response. It is a head without a face, for one thing. On the other hand, it is the joining of two L's; one is rounded and bulky in form, while the other is geometric and divided into rectangles. This form, made of two abstract shapes, is set against a black ground so that its colors – red, orange and blue – become holders of light, sources of illumination. Instead of trying to answer the question, "What am I looking at?" the

painting challenges us with questions of its own.

Can you luxuriate in the state of not knowing what you are looking at? If you can't, doesn't that say more about you than about the painting? If you feel uneasy, what might that mean? The title, *On the Verge*, can be understood as on the brink of becoming namable. In this sense, the title points to your anxiety, but with a gentle sense of humor. The possibility that we are looking at a nameless creature is also suggested by paintings such as *Agent Provocateur* (2016) and *Fortissimo* (2015). However, rather than forcing a name upon these entities, isn't it more satisfying simply to appreciate the awkwardness of their rounded forms, the unlikely joining of their divergent parts? We might further consider the ways the paint has been applied, the different textures they convey. We should then go on to think about Shalom's use of color, which always comes across as specific to the particular painting under scrutiny.

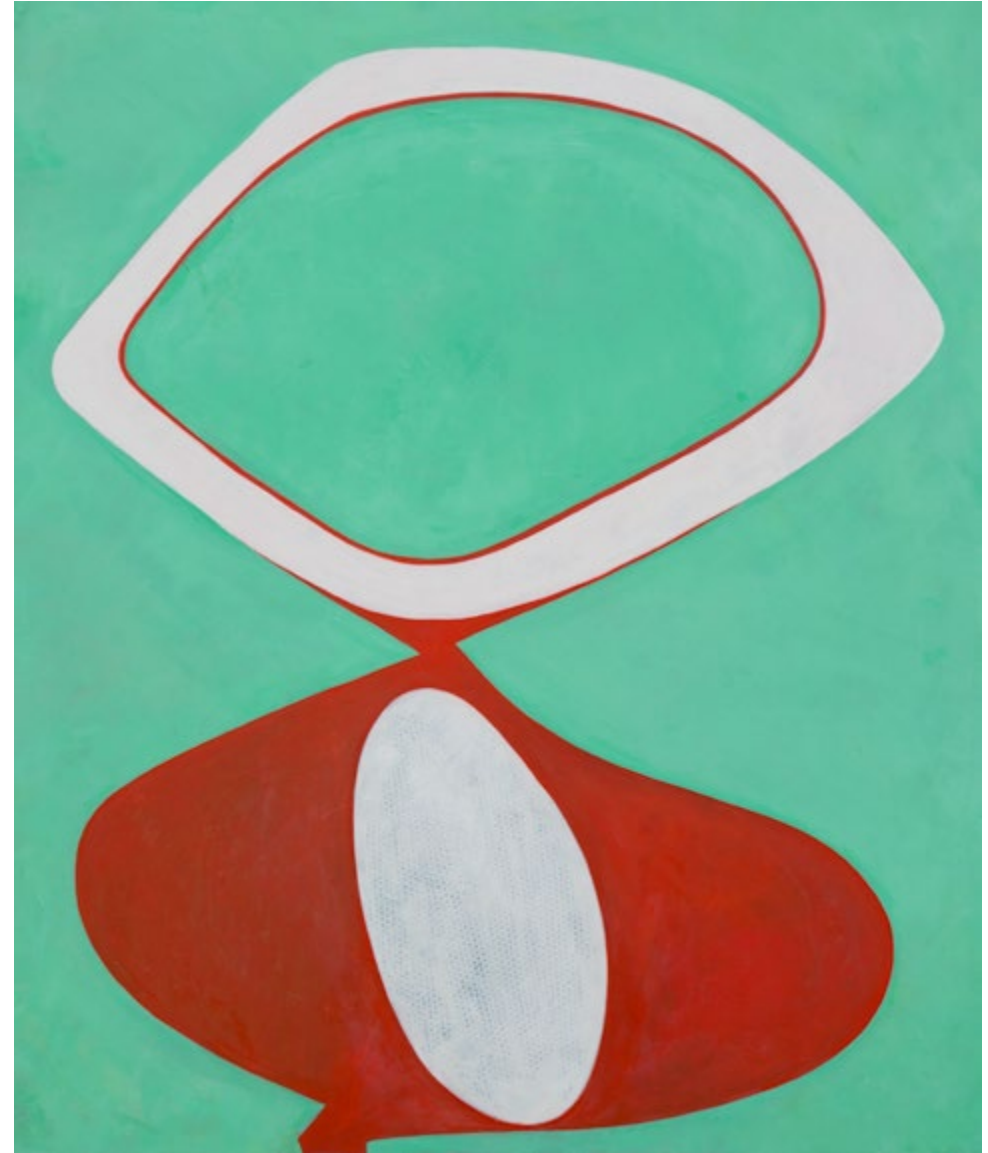
In these works, as opposed to the ones in *Just This*, her 2014 show at The Painting Center, the palette seems brighter, more saturated, sharing something with a child's playroom, that is, if the Mad Hatter and Jeremy Bentham had painted it. Bentham (1748-1832) came up with the concept of the Panopticon, a round building whose inhabitants (prisoners) could be viewed by a single observer (watchman). I am thinking of the painting *Maverick* (2015), which seems, on the face of it, to be an aerial view.

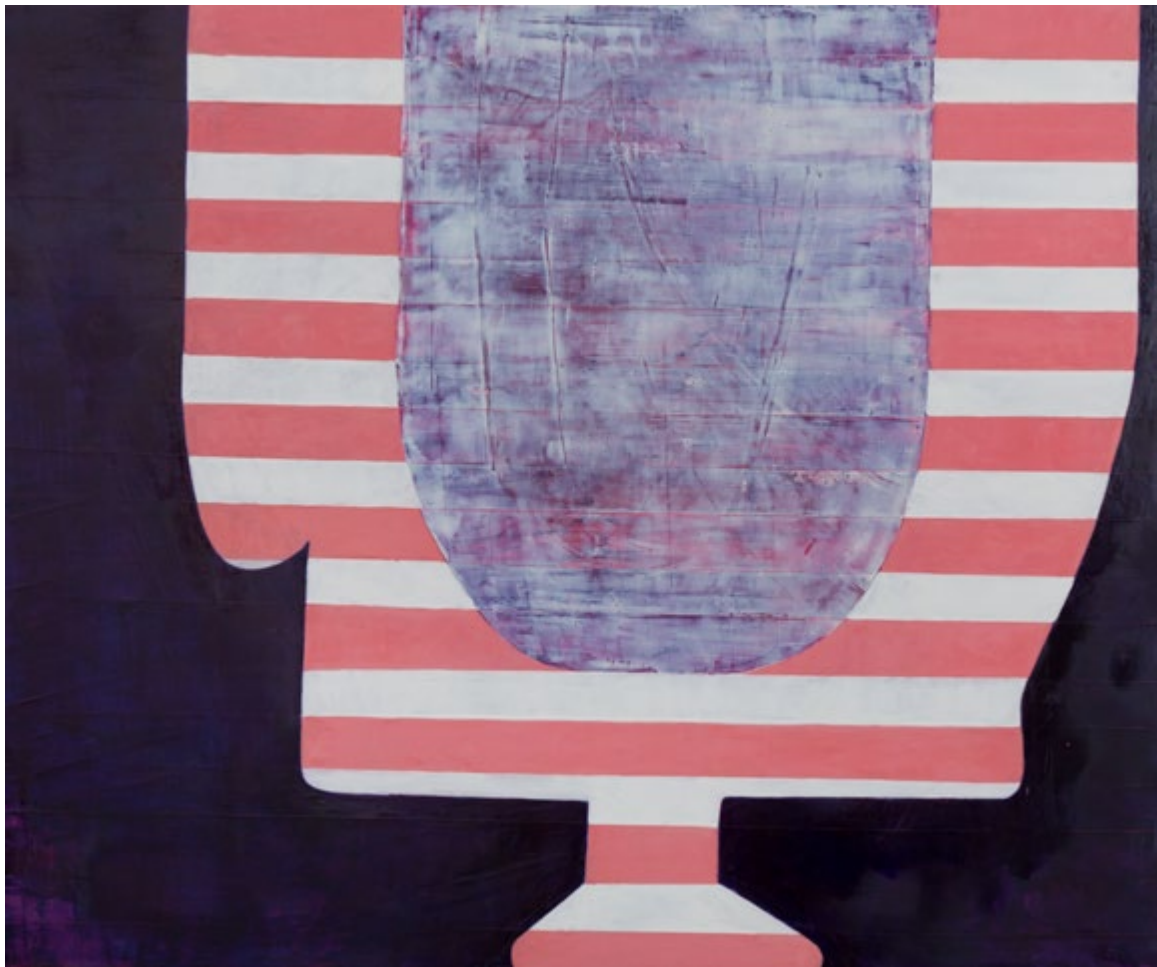
The greens, grays and umbers Shalom uses in her work can be reminiscent of institutional interiors. Remarkably, they stop just short of being drab. And it is in the stopping short, and in her use of dusky pinks, deep blues, and dark violets, that we get a sense of Shalom's masterful sense of color. She can use dowdy and electric colors in the same painting. This is not Impressionist color – there is something grating, gritty and urban about her palette. By refusing to use seductive color and eye-pleasing combinations, Shalom folds another possibility into our reading of her work. Instead of looking at the paintings, we must engage with them. To my mind, that offers the deepest pleasure of all.

John Yau, 2016

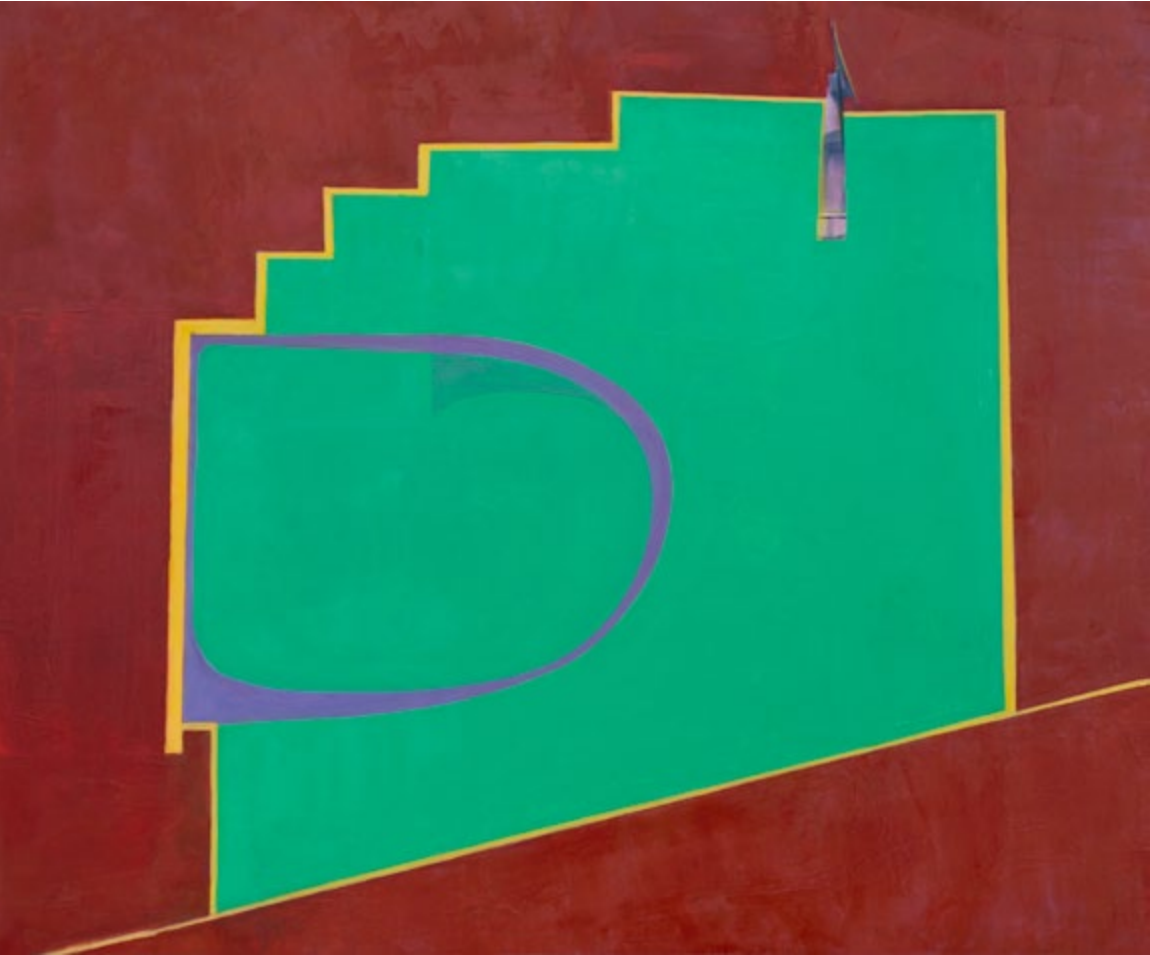
\*Shunryo Sukuki Roshi, from Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind.

*Shapeshifter*, 2015  
Oil on panel, 36 x 30 inches





*Ruminator*, 2016  
Oil on panel, 30 x 36 inches



*Quixotic*, 2016  
Oil on panel, 30 x 36 inches



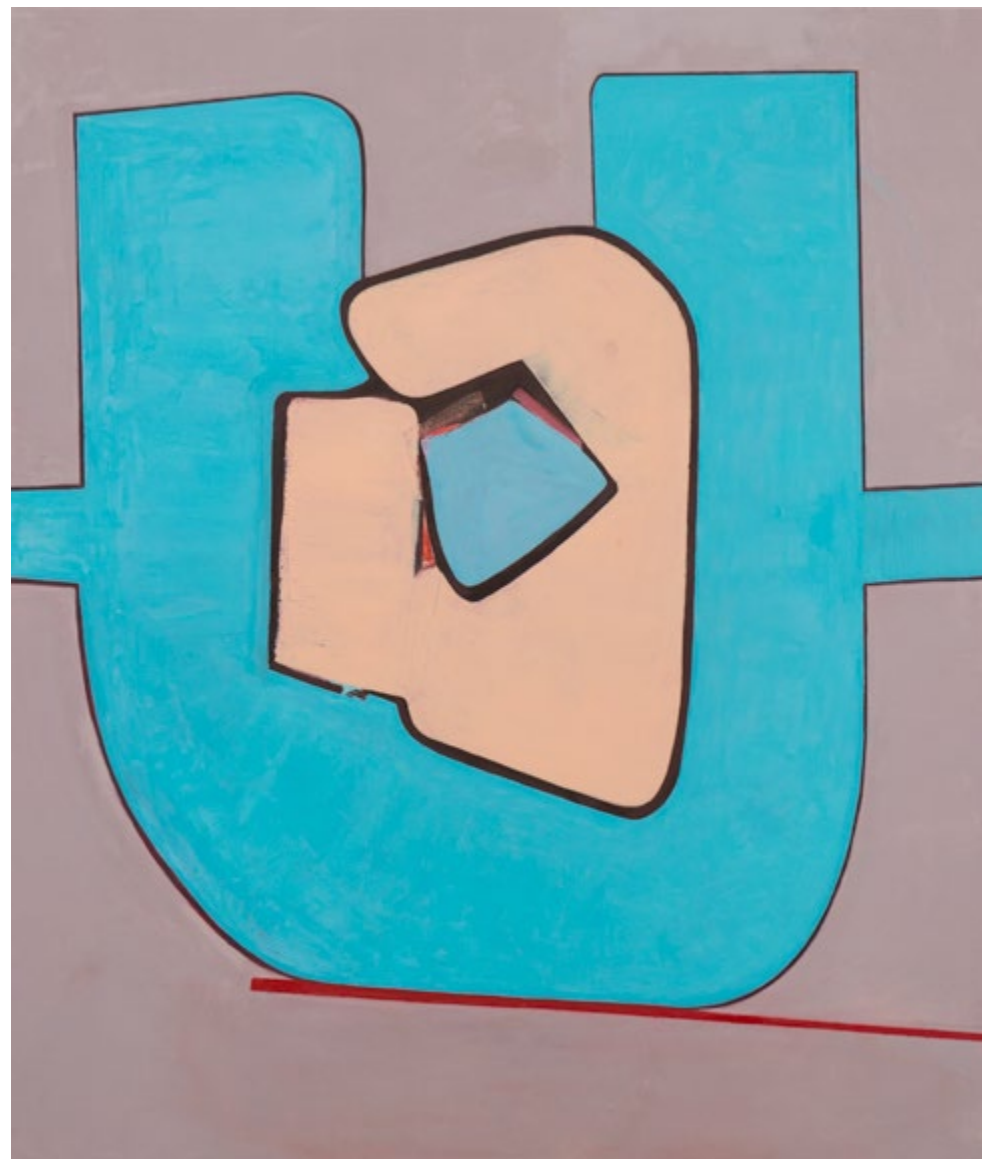
*Debonair*, 2016  
Oil on panel, 36 x 36 inches

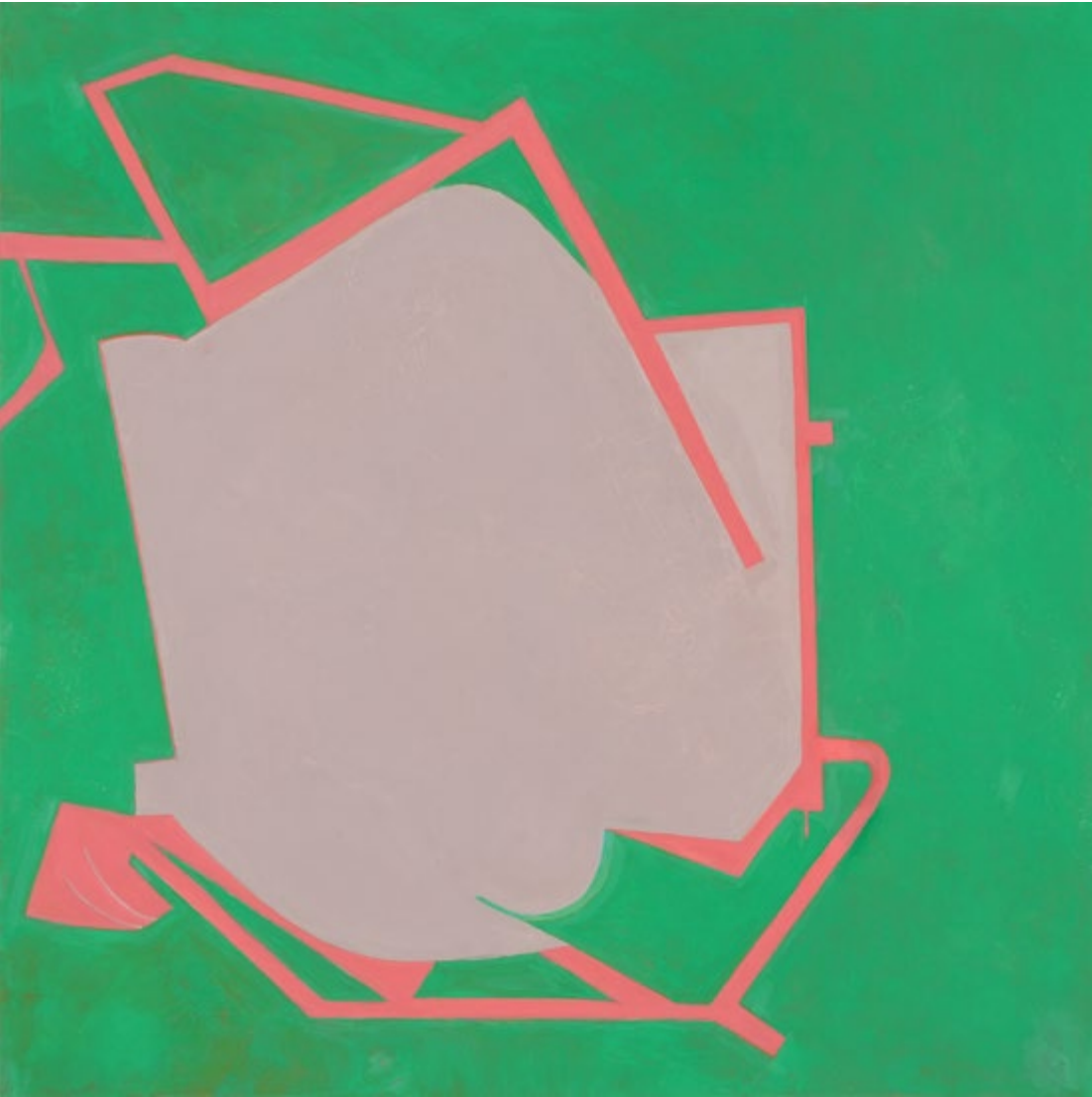


*Lionhearted*, 2016  
Oil on panel, 36 x 30 inches



*Savior Fair*, 2016  
Oil on panel, 36 x 30 inches





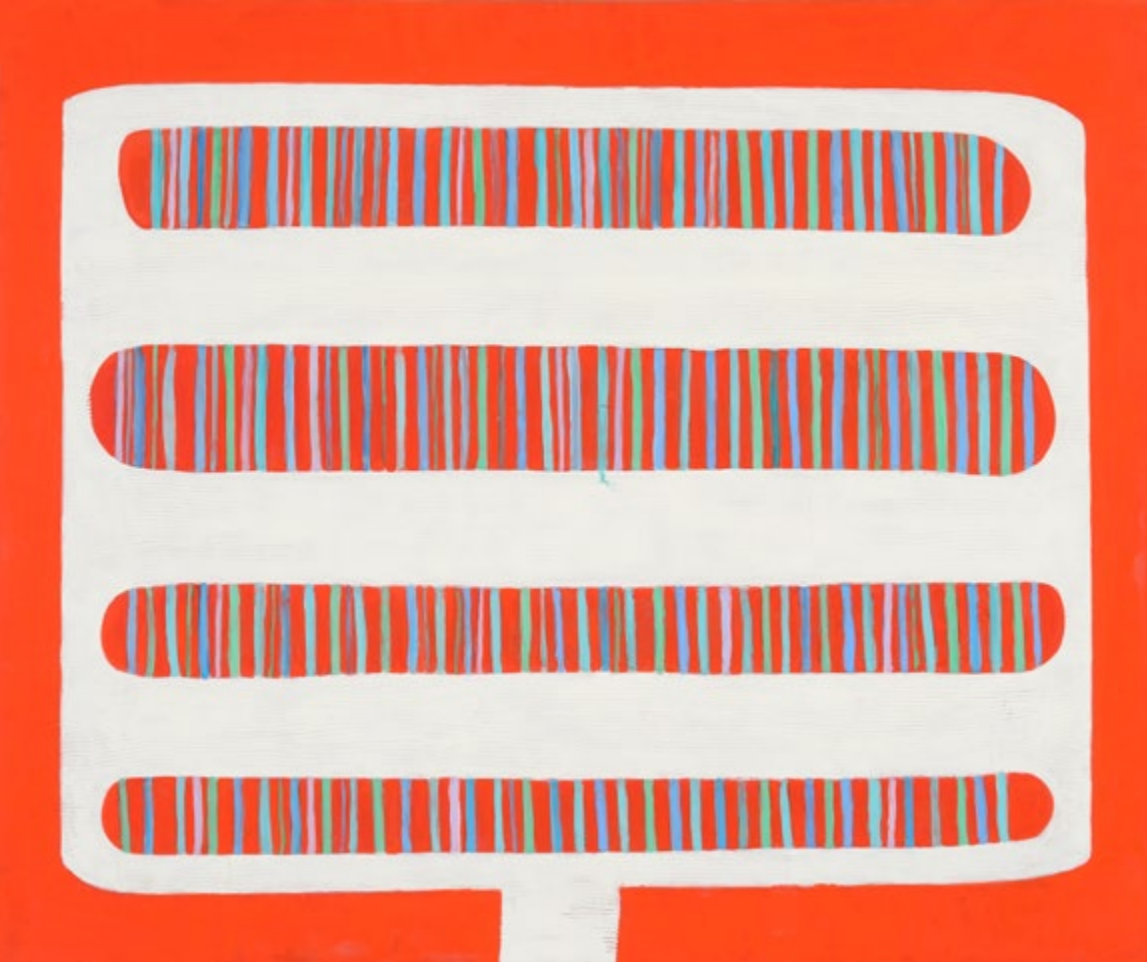
*Nice Nelly*, 2015  
Oil on panel, 24 x 24 inches

*Fortissimo*, 2015  
Oil on panel, 36 x 30 inches



*Rendezvous*, 2015  
Oil on panel, 20 x 24 inches





*Merrymaking*, 2015  
Oil on panel, 30 x 36 inches



*Table for Two*, 2016  
Oil on panel, 20 x 20 inches



*Maverick*, 2016  
Oil on panel, 36 x 36 inches





*Agent Provocateur*, 2016  
Oil on panel, 12 x 12 inches



*Town Crier*, 2016  
Oil on panel, 24 x 24 inches

## ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS

2016 John Davis Gallery, Hudson, NY  
2014 John Davis Gallery, Hudson, NY  
*Just This*, The Painting Center, New York, NY  
2012 John Davis Gallery, Hudson, NY  
2009 John Davis Gallery, Hudson, NY  
2004 John Davis Gallery, New York, NY  
1996 Troyer Fitzpatrick Lassman Gallery, Washington, DC  
1994 55 Mercer Gallery, New York, NY  
1989 Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA

## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2016 *Alumni Show*, New York Studio School, Curated by Andrew Arnot, Lawrence Greenberg, Leslie Heller and Miles Manning  
2015 *Alumni Show*, New York Studio School, Curated by Fred Valentine, Jason Andrews & Ygenevas Baras  
Labspace Art Gallery, Great Barrington, Mass  
*Little Hand*, Drawing Rooms, Jersey City, NJ  
2014 New Jersey Arts Annual, Newark Museum, Newark, NJ  
The Last Brucennial, New York, NY  
Valentine Gallery, The Art Store, New York, NY  
2013 *Wit*, The Painting Center, New York, NY, Curated by Joanne Freeman  
2011 *Alumni Show*, New York Studio School, Curated by John Newman  
*Abstraction*, Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York, NY  
2004 Stefan Stux Gallery, New York, NY  
*Emerge 2003*, Aljira Contemporary Art Center, Newark, NJ, Curated by Dominique Nahas  
2003 Night of a Thousand Drawings, Artists Space, New York, NY  
Visual Aids Benefit Exhibition, Galerie LeLong, New York, NY  
New Jersey Arts Annual, Morris Museum, Morristown, NJ, Curated by Willie Cole  
2001 Mysop Gallery, Art Guys, Houston, TX  
1997 Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, DC  
1990 Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, NY  
1988 Rose Art Museum, Waltham, MA

## PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY  
Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, NY  
Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA  
Rose Art Museum, Waltham, MA  
Erie Museum of Art, Erie, PA  
Hudson Area Library, January 2011

## AWARDS & RESIDENCIES

2016 MacDowell Colony Residency (October)  
2007 New American Painting, Mid-Atlantic Edition  
2005 Mid-Atlantic Artist Fellowship Grant  
Artists Talk on Art Panel, Curated by Stefan Stux  
2003 Art Omi Residency, Hudson, NY  
Geraldine Dodge Foundation Fellowship  
Emerge 2003 Fellowship, Aljira Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, NJ  
Excellence in Painting Graduate Award, Montclair State University, NJ  
1997 NEA Arts and Humanities Grant, Washington, DC

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Johanne Mattera, *Color: Field and Form, Part II*, August 29, 2012, johannemattera.blogspot.com  
Lisa Pressman, *Studio Visit with Fran Shalom*, Thursday, August 18, 2011, lisapressman.blogspot.com.  
*New American Painting*, Mid-Atlantic Edition Issue #69.  
Benjamin Genocchio, "Young and Provocative, Time Is on Their Side," *New York Times*, September 12, 2004  
*Artist Fran Shalom at work in her Studio*, Mana Contemporary's Facebook, August 18, 2015  
*Mockingbird: Fran Shalom*, August 31, 2015  
Stephen B. MacInnis, *Painter's Progress: Have you met Fran Shalom?*, June 11, 2014  
Anne Russinof, *Gallery Travels: Fran Shalom at The Painting Center*, April 28, 2014  
Brett Baker, *Painter's Table: Top Ten Best Posts*, August 2011, The Huffington Post  
*Untitled* by Fran Shalom

## EDUCATION

Montclair State University, MFA, painting  
New York Studio School  
San Francisco Art Institute, MFA, photography  
University of California at Berkeley, BA

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www.franshalom.com

