

## **“Side to Side, Three Ways”**

The three painters in the **Key Projects exhibition, “Side to Side, Three Ways”** work within the traditions of reductive abstraction using simplicity and clarity of form, and eschew narratives or stories, in order to arrive at deeper and more universal meanings. Abstract painting has a long and complex history, and yet still seems to be intimidating to many viewers. There’s an assumption that it depends upon a theoretically based process, too abstruse for the average person, which must be read about in order to understand the work. I would posit that in fact, if we allow ourselves to drop all attempts at intellectual analysis and stand directly in front of any of these paintings, seeing and feeling and paying attention to our reactions in the present moment, we would respond directly and powerfully, in the way that all real art requires and rewards.

When we come upon the paintings of **Emily Berger, Kim Uchiyama,** and **Manel Lledós,** we see them with our eyes, but also feel them with our bodies. This is not just because paintings are also objects, but because these particular paintings employ illusions of physical

structure: bands that run from side to side and from top to bottom, in a way that mimics architecture, landscape, textiles or texts. Their scale in most instances is large enough to feel almost life-size. The viewer, as a vertically oriented creature, sees themselves mirrored, feels the gravity implicit in the compositions, as well as the musical rhythms of the repetition of shapes. Compositions can be read in one go, and then as text: left to right, right to left and from top to bottom – and then back to the whole gestalt of the rectangular shape formed by the stripes of color. It's a way of seeing that we never tire of: this stimulating way of making sense of ourselves standing in front of an equally animated situation/embodied object. Are we situated in it as in a landscape? Are we moving in and out of a curved illusion of space, are we watching the flickering light of a fluttering veil, a transparent text, a musical score? Are we immersed in a time that feels eternal and slow, or the syncopated time of city streets, the meditative and measured time of reading, or lightning bursts of time, pulsing and present? These works do all of the above, each sensibility producing differing effects and unique meanings, while using a similar and simple compositional device.

**Kim Uchiyama's** work deals with a kind of timeless experience of form and color, influenced by the architecture of ancient Greece. She states:

“The works ... are based on the earth, sea, and sky of ancient Greece as filtered by my modernist influences. The presence of Greek temples and their situation within their surrounding landscapes impressed me deeply when I visited them. Theatrical and dramatic, the geometry of the temples directly contrasts undulating, earthbound settings. I felt both material weight and the weight of history from these sites.”

In addition to conveying the heft and mass of the temples without directly referencing them pictorially, Uchiyama also sometimes ambitiously conveys a feeling of ascension, of brilliant sky and sunlight. The experience is of both iconic, grounded form, and the exhilaration of rising up, of release into air. The palette reflects this, as does the size and scale of the bands of color. Each large horizontal stripe is bounded on either side by lighter and thinner strips of neutral color. This rhythm of light and dark creates a flickering impression, and allows the color to read at its fullest hue, without the distraction of a close, differently hued edge. Dusty ochres, earthy browns, blues, burnt reds and olive green conjure light, heat, stone: cultural monuments as they are set in their particular natural location. We experience this work viscerally and visually, the reductive bands of color allowing for a multiplicity of

meanings and sense of time. The emotional response causes us to stop in our tracks. We remain still and open to what our bodies and mind tell us in this conjoined state, made whole in this timeless moment.

The bands of color in the work of **Manel Lledós** are similar and yet entirely different than Uchiyama's measured repetitions of color. Here, there are curved edges, suddenly and unexpectedly interrupting the flow of the composition, creating a sense of either a space morphing, flowing, or a curved structure setting another boundary. The curves "embrace" the painting periodically, grounding us back towards our own bodies in space. Lledós speaks of approximating a space, creating a kind of instability between near and far, of continuity and discontinuity as a metaphor for his life, where he comes back and forth to the city "as a wave". He "plots" the surface, using what seems like a musically syncopated rhythm. Unlike the other two artists, Lledós employs a square format for his painting, and so his compositions read less as building structures and more as sign. Color, applied flatly in alternating bands, serves as a catalyst in grounding the mutability of his spatial construction. It seems that palette choice references signage, urban

advertising spaces, flags etc. in its use of bright hues alternating with neutrals or white. Color functions as light, space and structure, in a bold rhythm that is Stuart Davis-jazzy, widening our eyes and inspiring joy. We experience a slight loss of balance alternating with stability, momentary pleasure and the unease of ceaseless change. Lledós gives us his sense of life today and we are there with him, feeling its ceaseless ebb and flow.

**Emily Berger** works within the tradition of Abstract Expressionism, using gesture to create repeating striations of sumptuous color. Unlike Uchiyama and Lledós, Berger allows her long horizontal edges to soften, break apart, ripple and coalesce in lines that can be off-kilter, scraped through and uneven. Her gestures seem to come from the elbow and shoulder, and the horizontal lines sometimes show evidence of gravity, as her arm follows its natural movement into a downward curve at the center of the panel. Short, choppy, vertical gestures “write” their way across the surface within the bands of color. These horizontal strips serve to keep the unruly painted marks in order, thereby conveying a tension between liberation and structure, between emotion

and logic. Color can be dark and brooding - blacks and blues that feel deeply resonant - or they sing with yellows and bright reds. Wood grain shows through sometimes, revealing the materiality of the support, and providing a pinkish tone that often sets off the color of the slightly thicker, painterly marks. This way of working allows for much variety of affect and meaning, reading as text, fabric, musical notation, or the seductiveness of a mysterious landscape. The evidence of Berger's process of searching through the paint to "find the painting" leaves us with a presence that feels embodied, full of feeling and poetically evocative.

In an online statement, artist Kim Uchiyama writes "...by embracing limitation, painters are released to create their own autonomy and meaning, and ... there is the possibility for this meaning to take unlimited form." These works by **Uchiyama**, **Lledós** and **Berger**, while similar in basic structure, are a testament to the infinite nature of artistic imagination; limits that reveal the unlimited, the unbound and finally uncontainable energy and meaning of our human lives. Each uniquely manifested sensibility is revealed within an abstract language that any of us can feel and understand through our bodies, minds and

emotions. The work empowers us to find enriched meaning in our responses, then, as we travel outside the art gallery or museum. Herein lies the great strength and value of abstract art!

Karen Schifano, June 2020