

An abstract artwork featuring a vibrant green background with various geometric and organic shapes. A prominent dark brown vertical band runs down the right side, containing a series of horizontal white stripes. To the right of this band, there are stylized, angular shapes in white and black, resembling a face or a mask. The overall composition is dynamic and layered, with a mix of colors including green, brown, white, and black.

CYNTHIA CARLSON

THE SHAPE OF THINGS

duane thomas new york

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The exhibition *The Shape of Things* at Duane Thomas Gallery marks a culminating moment in the long and restless career of Cynthia Carlson. While her work has often been described in terms of associations to the pattern and decoration movement this new body of paintings feels less like a continuation than a synthesis—nearly sixty years of inquiry gathered into compositions that are at once audacious and distilled. These works do not simply extend her vocabulary; they consolidate it with a clarity that suggests an artist fully in command of her history.

To understand the achievement of these paintings, one must begin in Chicago in the late 1960s. From 1968 to 1971, Carlson produced figurative paintings that bore affinities to the Chicago Imagists: acid color, elastic line, and a willingness to merge the grotesque with the ornamental. Though never doctrinaire, her early works shared that milieu's commitment to a kind of anti-minimalist exuberance. Figures bent and swelled; outlines thickened and pulsed; pictorial space seemed to wobble between cartoonish flatness and hallucinatory depth. Yet even then, something else was stirring. Beneath the figuration lay an obsession with surface pattern and compositional rhythm. The body was already becoming a site of ornamental inquiry.

A decisive shift occurred in the early 1970s, shortly after her inclusion in "26 Contemporary Women Artists," organized by Lucy Lippard at the Aldrich Museum. That moment signaled both recognition and transformation. Carlson began departing from overt figuration, transferring the bodily energy of her earlier work into abstraction. Swelling contours and rhythmic lines remained, but no longer described a figure. Instead, they generated spatial systems in which pattern structured the entire pictorial field. Her subsequent association with the Pattern and Decoration movement aligned her with artists reclaiming ornament from the margins of modernist discourse. Where high modernism privileged austerity, Pattern and Decoration insisted on the legitimacy of repetition, embellishment, and historically marginalized visual languages.

Carlson's contribution was distinctive: she treated pattern not as quotation but as structure, testing how it could reorganize space and destabilize hierarchies within painting.

This formal rigor has always been grounded in a private discipline: her decades-long practice of filling books with drawings. These notebooks function as laboratories in which she studies

patterns, fragments of other artists' works, and her own recurring motifs. Ideas are revised, recombined, and tracked across years. The finished canvases, for all their exuberance, emerge from this sustained research. What appears playful is underwritten by method.

Critics, including writer Joe Fyfe for *Brooklyn Rail*, have remarked on the oscillation in Carlson's work between delight and architecture. That tension remains central. Even when compositions seem exuberant, they are anchored by carefully calibrated armatures; chromatic clashes are deliberate; spatial ambiguities are engineered.



Cynthia Carlson, *untitled dress*, 1970, color pencil on paper, 30 x 22 in

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In *The Shape of Things*, these qualities converge with new assurance. Motifs reminiscent of her early distortions reappear—not as figures but as bulbous contours suggesting organic presence. The decorative density associated with her *Pattern and Decoration* years is present yet more tensile. Negative space asserts itself more decisively, allowing intricate passages to breathe. Color relationships feel both daring and exact.

What distinguishes these works is their synthesis. The boldness of her Chicago years, the feminist reclamation of decoration, and the decades devoted to abstraction interpenetrate without competing. The paintings seem to contain their own history, yet they do not read as retrospective. Instead, they register as fully present—evidence of an artist who remembers every experiment and has distilled their lessons.

There is a measured pacing to these canvases. Areas of concentrated patterning alternate with passages of openness, creating a rhythm that guides the eye without overwhelming it. The result is neither maximalist nor austere but balanced. Ornament is no longer oppositional; it is foundational.

Across six decades, Carlson has moved through identifiable scenes. *The Shape of Things* clarifies the independence of that trajectory. In this sense, the exhibition confirms what attentive viewers have long suspected: that Carlson's career has forged a singular path within American art. She has belonged to scenes—but she has never been reducible to them. The works at Duane Thomas Gallery crystallize this independence. They synthesize nearly sixty years of artistic research into compositions that are both generous and exacting, playful and profound.

To call these paintings her most masterful to date is not to diminish the vitality of earlier periods. Rather, it is to recognize the rare achievement of an artist who has managed to integrate youthful audacity, mid-career theoretical rigor, and late-career clarity into a coherent whole. *The Shape of Things* stands as testament to a practice that has remained porous, curious, and self-critical across decades. In doing so, Carlson emerges not simply as a participant in various movements, but as a singular American master—one whose work continues to reshape the possibilities of abstraction by honoring, and transforming, its own history.



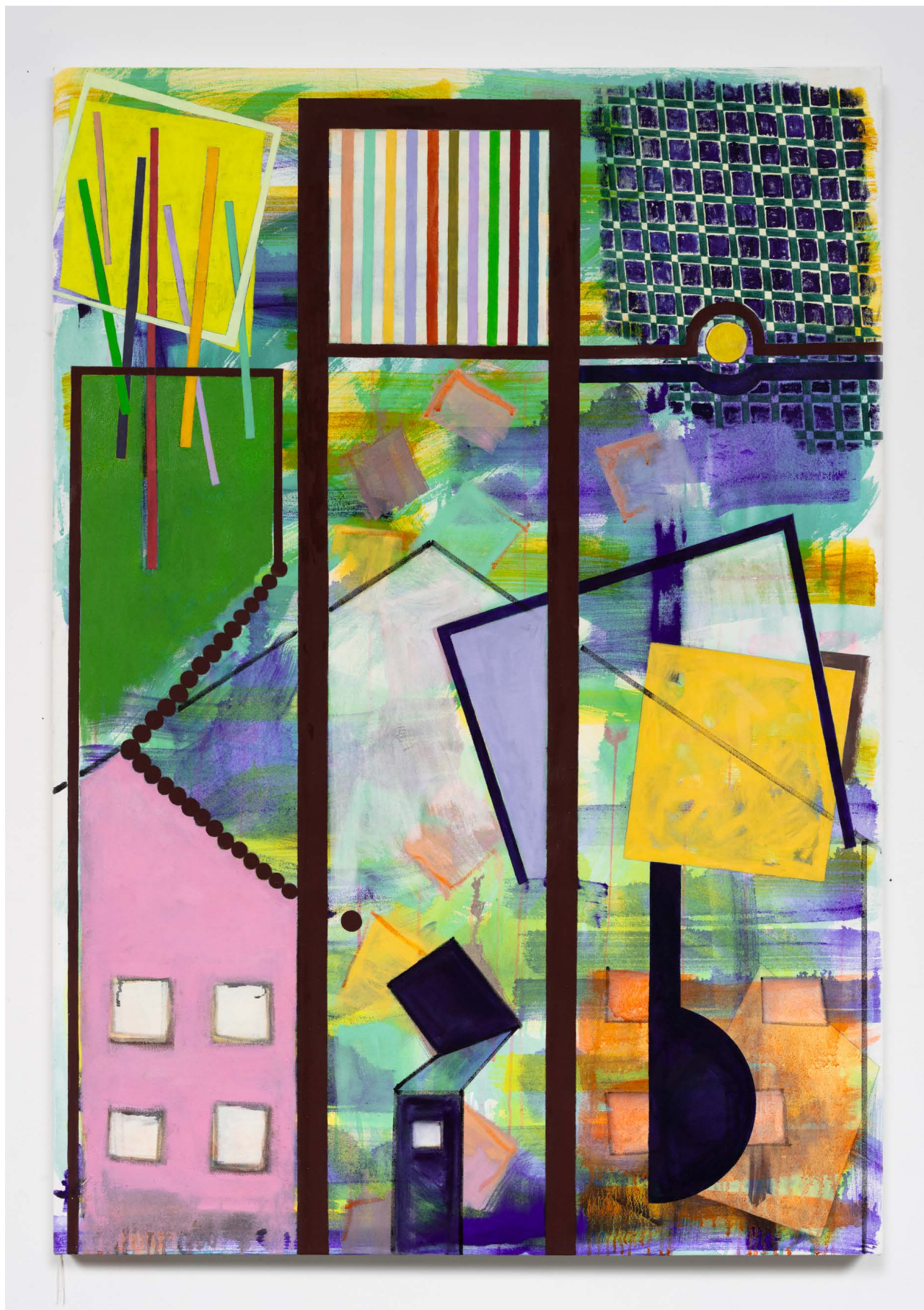
Cynthia Carlson, *Cozy Hang*, oil on woven canvas, 1974 60 x48 in

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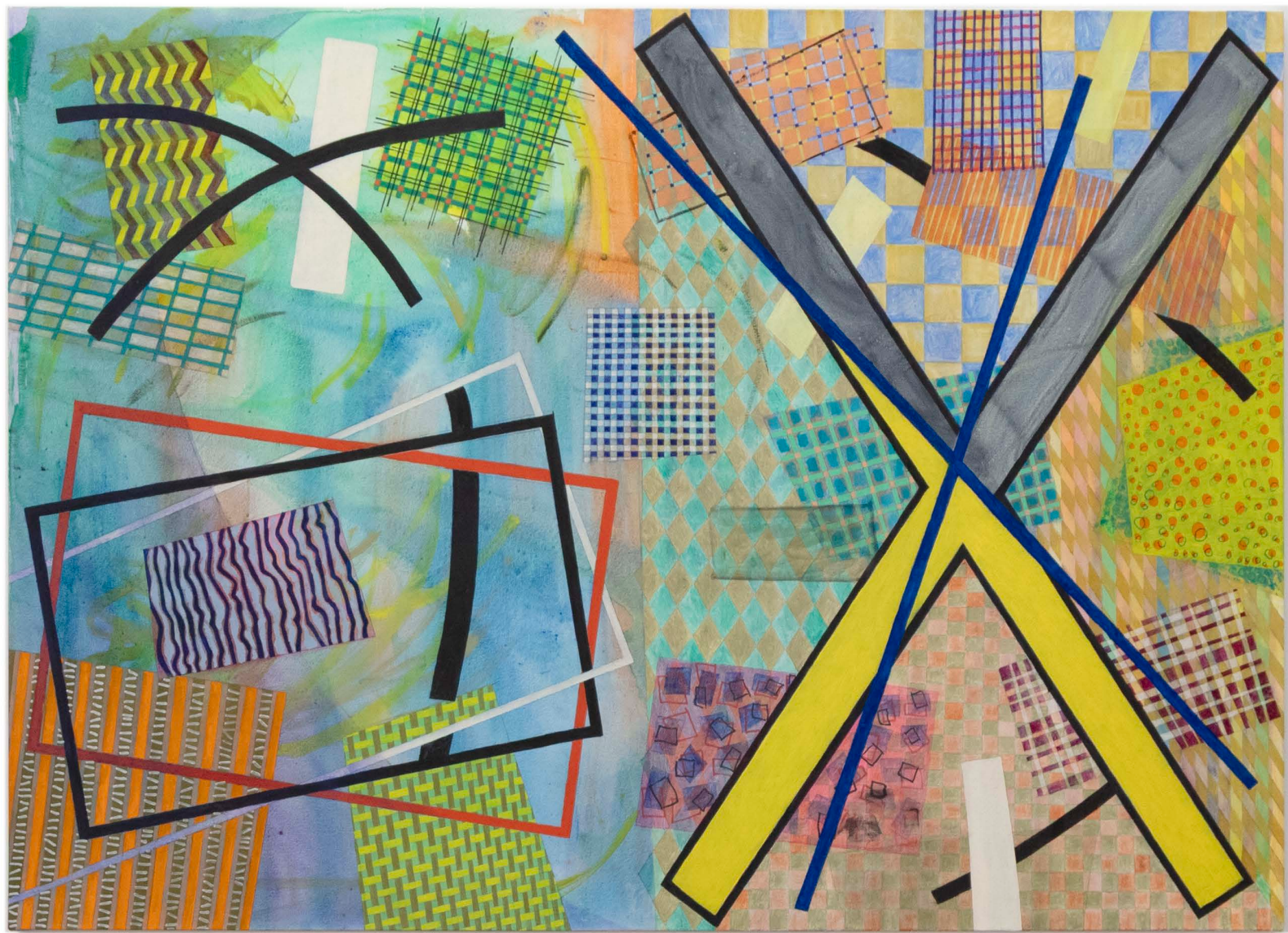
.01 Cynthia Carlson, A Constructive Enterprise, 2024, oil on canvas, 60 x 42 in
USD 28,000



.02 Cynthia Carlson, *The Anxious Watcher*, oil on canvas, 2024, 42 x 60 in
USD 28,000



.03 Torn By Many Interests, 2024, oil on canvas, 44 x 50 in
USD 28,000



.04 Cynthia Carlson, Impatience Mounted, 2025, 42 x 60 in
USD 28,000



.05 Cynthia Carlson, The Cheering Never Ceased, 2024, oil on canvas, 60 x 42 in
USD 28,000



.06 Cynthia Carlson, An Extraordinary Achievement, 2024, 42 x 60 in
USD 28,000

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