

Clare Rojas @ Paule Anglim

David Roth

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Square Cylinder



Clare Rojas has moved a long way from her Mission School roots. Where several years ago she was painting psychosexual dramas in a folk-art manner, she's since reinvented herself as a geometric abstractionist, making works that call to mind the "non-objective" art of the early '60s. Retro as that may sound, Rojas is, in fact, part of micro trend among artists who, as of late, have sought sustenance (and possibly refuge) in a historical lode that, no matter how well-mined, has yet be exhausted. Geometric forms, because of their ancient origins, continue to fire the imagination, and as such, they can be deployed to tweak perception through alterations in color, shape and line. Rojas' paintings do all of these things. At her most whimsical she draws favorable comparisons to Ellsworth Kelly, and at her most pointed and austere, to John McLaughlin.

Here it's worth remembering that the original impetus behind nonobjective art was to banish representation and illusionism, a burden only partially lifted from painting by photography. The quest, originally cast in spiritual terms, took on particular urgency in the years between the wars. Recast by minimalists and hard-edged-painters in the '60s and '70s, and powered by formalist arguments about flatness, geometric abstraction acquired a second life, becoming domesticated and institutionalized in the process. In its third incarnation, the one Rojas inhabits, the rewards have grown substantially harder to reach, owing to the number of possibilities that have already been explored.

In this, her fourth exhibition at the gallery, Rojas navigates this well-trod territory with paintings of two types: those that feature curves and those employ hard-angled geometric forms. In both cases, yawning white spatial gaps and clashing colors play important roles; and in this show, as in previous exhibitions, it's the curvaceous forms that prove to be her strongest suit. They give

off a spooky sensuality, and most importantly, they refer to things outside themselves, something the more angular paintings, for the most part, do not do. Significantly, all the works are untitled, further evidence of Rojas' desire to purge her art of the dramas that so dominated her art at the start of her career, beginning in the early 2000s when she rose to prominence in the Bay Area and beyond.

Of the paintings utilizing curved forms, the strongest calls to mind a Middle Eastern city, seen in wispy spires arching upward to sharp points. Figurative allusions arise from a work containing twinning ghostly shapes, pinched on either side by horizontal bands and surrounded by a field of pure white. Elsewhere, totemic associations spring from a small painting on a freestanding wall; while on a long wall, a trio of virtually identical hard-edged compositions reveals what minute shifts in color and line can accomplish. The exercise feels like something of a parlor game – until you reach a fourth iteration of the painting in which a truncated cross, painted in deep blue and destabilized at the bottom left by an off-kilter flap, snaps us into a state of hyperawareness, achieving something akin to a heraldic vision.

It reminds us of why geometry remains a potent lure for artists like Rojas who, in a former life, might have disdained its conventions. In paintings like this, which show her in peak form, it feels oddly liberating.