

ARTFORUM

Patricia Treib

Galerie Nordenhake

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Patricia Treib, *Interpose*, 2023, diptych, oil on canvas, overall 72 × 108".

The exploration of artistic abstraction in Europe started in the realm of decorative arts before it did in fine art. British architect Owen Jones devoted a chapter of his pioneering book *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856) to “Leaves and Flowers from Nature,” demonstrating how natural forms can be gradually morphed into various stages of abstraction discussed in the preceding chapters. This systematic approach to formal reduction was then introduced to visual art by modernists—for instance, by Theo van Doesburg in his cow studies (ca. 1917–18). Abstraction as a process of translation from observed shapes to simplified images as filtered through the sensibility of the artist is one of the most enduring legacies of modernism. Patricia Treib’s pictorial language displays a deep understanding of the grammar of ornament and offers an idiosyncratic take on the process of abstraction.

Consisting of eight large paintings elegantly hung across three rooms, her exhibition “Undulations” showcased Treib’s mastery of flowing forms and handling of her characteristically thinned paint. *La Ripa* (all works 2023), for instance, shows a large organic green form topped by a smaller brown mass—together suggesting a plant of some kind—accompanied by a pale-blue horn-shaped object with sharper edges that suggests a utilitarian artifact. Is it a pitcher? Is its pointed tip a spout? Its decorative pattern in deeper blue certainly implies a utilitarian object. The composition immediately brings to mind certain still lifes by Matisse, whose acute awareness of the decorative arts was essential for his work. The forms in Treib’s paintings echo various sources, such as architectural details or vintage sewing patterns repeatedly worked through studies on paper until they are fully transformed into a composition, which she then executes on canvas.

While the show’s first two rooms presented works that were generally refined, fluid, and vaguely biomorphic, the gears shifted suddenly in the third room. The last piece in the sequence of pictures was *Interpose*, a substantial diptych (six by nine feet) dominated by a background of dark indigo, almost black. Its bulging fruit-like shapes are heavy and appear burdened by gravity, unlike the weightlessness of floating forms common in Treib’s previous paintings. The picture is nocturnal.

Torso, hanging in the same room, has a composition identical to *Greek Icon*, in the second room, but this became noticeable only when one looked back to the preceding room. And these two works generate entirely different interpretations of Treib’s practice. The immediacy and gestural character of her work are often emphasized: The press release compared her paintings to frescoes and highlighted the fact that each was created in a single day. However, two alternative renditions of the same image hinted at a much more systematic attitude toward picture making. They brought to mind Rosalind E. Krauss’s influential analysis in “The Originality of the Avant-Garde” (1981) of the “illusion of spontaneity” in modernism as “the product of a fully calculated procedure.” The hanging, which allowed the two pictures to be seen together only from the vantage point of the last room, suggested that the artist intended to self-reflexively negate the myth of instantaneity her practice has attained. Repetition of patterns and details is also a quintessential process in decorative art, alluding to the artist’s cross-disciplinary consciousness.

Adjectives often used to describe Treib’s paintings include airy, light, soft, calligraphic, and playful. The painting *Interpose* is a departure in her oeuvre. The exhibition was like a journey, starting with works in which the artist presented her perfect control in the style she’d developed carefully over the years and arriving at an ambitious and unexpected piece in which one could sense a new direction in which she is beginning to embark. This was probably one of those rare exhibitions in which viewers could witness a transition and evolution in an artistic practice taking place before their eyes.