

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Forms are finite, flat, rimmed by a hard, clean edge....They are autonomous shapes, sufficient unto themselves as shapes. These clean-edge forms are presented in uniform, flat colors running border to border.¹

Writing in 1959, critic Jules Langsner articulated the key characteristics of what would come to be known as “hard edge painting.” Lorser Feitelson’s (1898-1978) work was included in this genre-defining text, and the exhibition it accompanied. As one of its chief practitioners he has been influential for generations of artists. Over the years, as trends in art have fluctuated, so has the visibility of Feitelson’s work. But his art endures and today artists are discovering parallels between their work and Feitelson’s through a reconsideration of, and heightened engagement with, the formal issues introduced by hard edge painting. Alois Kronschlaeger (b. 1966) and Elise Ferguson (b. 1964) are two such artists who create work that, while utilizing unorthodox materials, parallels Feitelson’s formal preoccupations from half a century ago. The three artists are linked through, among other things, the emphasis each places on making work that is optically engaging.

For his painting *Magical Space Forms* (1962) Feitelson drew inspiration from the striking geological formations he had seen as a young man visiting the Mediterranean island of Corsica. Featuring a pared down composition and planes of bold color, this painting is visually arresting. A strident orange is paired with a muted grey and dispersed over roughly equal parts of the canvas. The two colors are set directly against one another in an alternating fashion, each passage executed with a clean, razor-sharp efficiency. The viewer becomes engrossed in watching these two colors compete for primacy. This oscillation, caused by Feitelson’s rejection of the traditional hierarchy of figure over ground, is the primary formal goal of this painting.

Langsner’s 1959 description could describe all the works included in this exhibition, whether they date from 1962 or 2018. However, while Kronschlaeger and Ferguson consciously draw from historical precedents such as the aesthetics of hard edge painting, as epitomized by Feitelson, they ultimately supersede them to make work that is very much engaged with the contemporary moment. For example, Kronschlaeger presents a seeming paradox: the cleanly defined, yet materially soft, edge. In *Untitled* (2018), he threads lengths of fine Merino wool into a matrix of aluminum mesh to produce geometric patterns, clearly articulated through the physicality lent them by the woolen line. The mesh substrate introduces an element of transparency, allowing the work to interact with the space in which it is installed. However, this organic material does not establish a clean geometry, but rather subtly softens and blurs it. Every line is mirrored and amplified, repeated in radiating patterns until the composition permutes enough times to find its final resolution. These patterns, despite their materially rich substrate, are also very visually affecting. Just as Feitelson’s forms subverted the traditional hierarchy of figure over ground, so too do Kronschlaeger’s forms as they zig and zag across the mesh picture plane.

Ferguson engages with graphic processes and motifs as she fashions paintings out of plaster and pigment. In works such as *Racer* (2018) she provocatively juxtaposes a technique derived from screenprinting with a brightly patterned formal vocabulary. Lines wind like a racetrack, curving back on themselves and radiating outward. Like Kronschlaeger, Ferguson evokes the aesthetics of 1960s hard edge abstraction through her preoccupation with geometric motifs that make a strong optical

¹ Jules Langsner, “Four Abstract Classicists,” *Four Abstract Classicists* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 10.

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impression. Each of these motifs should be understood as discrete, as Feitelson's were, to use Langsner's terms: "autonomous shapes, sufficient unto themselves." But Ferguson updates the means used to develop these forms, creating them on the computer. In her work this digital hard edge meets the realities of materials and the human hand's manipulation of them, leaving uneven surfaces that, when inspected up close, reveal pencil marks, deckled edges and imperfect incisions that are at odds with our initial expectations.

Another statement by Langsner can be considered paradigmatic for all the work in this exhibition: "Forms in [these] paintings are in continuous flux...[they] are not frozen in an instant of time...The paintings take place in space-time. At one moment a form announces its presence, and the next moment it slips away, only to reassert itself again."² This emphasizes the role of the visual in the work of all the artists, since this flux—as it is achieved through geometric forms, clean edges, and a strident palette—activates perception. For example, in Feitelson's *Magical Space Forms* spatial primacy is upended as what Langsner dubs "colorforms" dance across the viewer's retina. In Kronschlaeger's *Untitled* the juxtaposition of an organic material with a linear composition causes the pattern to fluctuate between physical presence and optical impression. In Ferguson's *Racer* colorful curving patterns make a strong visual impact, which is complicated by the handmade elements of the work—causing, as with Kronschlaeger, an oscillation between the physical and the optical.

Feitelson made his paintings at the dawn of the age of television, which perhaps contributed to his inclination towards the optical. The digital age that we are presently in, and out of which Kronschlaeger and Ferguson work, offers a seemingly endless expansion of the visual realm, the likes of which Feitelson could never have envisioned. Kronschlaeger and Ferguson's work suggests that this development should not be left unchecked, but rather should be anchored in a reassessment and embrace of the physicality of materials and processes of making. In all cases, a formally oriented, hard edge abstraction is what enables each artist to achieve his or her very timely goals.

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² Langsner, "Four Abstract Classicists," 11.