

**Review: Lilly Wei in Art in America, June-July 2004**

**PHILADELPHIA**

**Marcia Hafif at Larry Becker**

A dozen serene, modestly sized paintings by Marcia Hafif - eight of them 16 by 20 inches, the remainder 18 inches square - each a single glowing color, hung at carefully considered intervals in the two equally serene rooms of Larry Becker Contemporary Art. Like many so-called monochrome painters based in New York, Hafif enjoys a greater reputation in Europe than here. Working since the late 1960s, she has at times found herself in sync with the downtown avant-garde and at other times at odds with it. Painting, considered irrelevant when she was starting out, has always been her focus, although she has worked effectively with other mediums, including drawing, photography and text. Reluctant to give painting up, she has instead looked for ways "to begin again," in her phrase. Toward that end, Hafif belonged for a time in the early 80's to a loose (and contentious) group of radical artists who advocated a certain fundamentalism in painting - a stance that found more favor in France, Germany, Austria and Switzerland, for instance, than here.

All the works in this show were from the "Glaze paintings" series (2003), each annotated by the names of the colors involved in its making, such as Flesh Tint/Alizarin Crimson, Manganese Violet/Phthalocyanine Blue, Vermilion/Phthalocyanine Blue and Light Green/Indian Yellow; all are monochrome paintings constructed from two colors, made with the apparent precision of a dispassionate scientist. Hafif's project, which is ongoing, involves every aspect of making a painting, from grinding the pigment into oil to determining the scale, proportion and mark. She uses different mediums, such as oil, encaustic, egg tempera, casein and glazes, working with colors tonally so as to establish a scale of flesh tones, grays and so on, looking for straightforward ways to make paintings without complicated crafting, based in part on the nonhierarchical, nonauthorial methodologies of the 1960s and '70s.

Hafif's informed touch and application, however, are not neutral, and her paintings are ultimately art, not science - pragmatically made, perhaps, but perceptively elusive, as color always is. One painting is a gorgeous shimmering violet when viewed from a distance, but shifts to green when viewed close-up. Another is black, but made without black pigment. What sounds like a paint store instead becomes a color-filled, artfully installed mini-museum celebrating color with an array of paintings that, Hafif once wrote, stand in for traditional paintings that can no longer be made.