



Marcia Hafif

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Baumgartner Gallery

Interruption in the reign of discontinuities

Although she shows extensively elsewhere, Marcia Hafif's exhibition *Glaze Paintings* in Chelsea provides a rare opportunity to see the artist's work in New York.

The pure sensation of light that bounces off the surface of each of her canvases seems to indicate colors so precisely calibrated that each emits a single frequency of light. On closer inspection we can see that one thin glaze of color painted over another is applied over a white ground. It's as if the light has bent while traveling through each separate color and then reflects to emerge as one. All this happens much faster than we can see, affecting a threshold of pure presence. Each individual painting intones a singular note in perfect pitch that resonates throughout the space of the gallery, expanding our focus from inside to outside the frame.

I remember recognizing the "material nature of color" being Hafif's subject in *Mass Tone Painting from the Table of Pigments*, her last New York exhibition of paintings at the Stark Gallery in 1992. My astonishment at discovering the differences in matter, the minerals or the other various substances that compose pigments, centered on the way in which Hafif's process of grinding and applying those pigments to the surface of the canvas revealed it as her subject. Alizarin was particularly gritty, I recall, and reminded me that a retinue of assistants was needed in former times to render it fluid.

With the same deftness in leading us to her subject, *Glaze Paintings* by contrast investigates the nature of light reflected by color. These pieces are airy and seemingly quite detached from their own materiality, as if the surface were there to grab white light and give it back as a single frequency of radiant color.

Two layers of color exist on the surface taut with immediacy and when Hafif sometimes gives us the same two in reversed order it serves to reveal the intricate potential of her layering. A Cerulean Blue found both atop and beneath Flesh Tint yields two blue greys, one warmer and one cooler. In their respective depths all the ambiguity within the relationship of above and below, from the carnal to the divine, opens up and can be pondered. The uniting of colors is so exact it allows for a myriad of possible approaches, but you must take one.

Hafif's work might be called difficult; in any case it is demanding, it demands that you open yourself wholly to experience seeing as well as embracing all that is entailed when light penetrates the soul. Her paintings provide both, a catharsis and a surface upon which to reflect in the aftermath.

They sit just right in the room, not high or low, modest offerings of great precision and delicacy. The application of paint to a surface, the simple yet fundamental act of painting, is the core of monochrome; in Hafif's practice she reveals the complexity inherent to it. Each surface is carefully painted, neither too hesitantly to become tentative nor too wildly to become expressionistic, but as if somehow through a long time of searching the perfect middle ground was found. It is as though the artist took the emotion out of her gesture and gave its full weight over to color and light.

These are paintings to live with; you need a certain quietness to feel their emotive power. As you encounter them they have the potential to reveal to you the tenor of your days, to measure the changes from mourning to light against this poignant yellow or this joyous red. There will be difference among sameness as they bring you closer to the essential.

In their simple elegance they stand both against and in this world. It's almost too much to ask anyone to delve into their refined grounds with cars whizzing by in the busy marketplace outside and all the incessant hammering of construction determined to fill up every void in Manhattan. No, these works are not removed from life; their latency is to reveal the awesome truth of reflection, which is often more than we can bear to know. They might seem now out of step with the naïve realism of our times, but their overwhelming sense of presence brings them finely in tune with the moment.