

## MARCIA HAFIF: THE ART OF DISTILLATION

### *The Italian Paintings, 1961 – 1969*

By [Joan Waltemath](#)

Marcia Hafif's mostly two-color paintings now on view in Chelsea were created in Rome, and are being shown for the first time in the United States after thirty-seven years in storage. The exhibition reveals the paradox of a sensibility both in formation and fully formed. Trains of thought become visible in the room through Hafif's open and non-conclusive inquiry, an exploration that is refreshing in today's climate. It is a reminder of the possibility of the *production* of artworks being driven by the nature of an artist's investigation rather than the needs of a business model.



Installation view: *Marcia Hafif: The Italian Paintings, 1961 – 1969*. Fergus McCaffrey, April 21 – June 25, 2016. © Marcia Hafif. Courtesy Fergus McCaffrey.

While there are certain geometries among this group of paintings that include a circle, parallel lines, grids or lines crossed diagonally, for the most part, strongly corporeal outlines demarcate

her territories. In a body of work whose impact relies on stark and vacillating figure-ground reversal, Hafif's reticent vitality rests on the fulcrum of instability. These are works that seek the limits of volatility, where it can occur and where it doesn't in a number of unique pairings.

At the entrance to the exhibition, in *128* (September 1966), a vibrant orange and an equally light purple meet on a perfectly executed line bounding a form that seems to rise up from the lower edge of the canvas. Traveling along the smooth boundary line is effortless and expansive, until one seeks a word to name what it encompasses. There one finds Hafif's invisible edge. The discrete shapes call up a range of associations; a large orange "head-like" form becomes a passage of sorts when an indentation that would allow it to be read as a "head" is too slight for the thought to stick. Hovering beyond the realm of language her unnamable forms often resist entering into the domain of nomenclature.

In *168* (November 1967), where a pinkish red area calls up no immediate associations, it slowly morphs into a figural illusion by becoming the void between a woman's arms as seen from the vantage point of her feet while doing a push-up or "plank" pose. The two rounded breasts are central; yet, unlike its counterpart, when perception shifts and the void goes solid again, the form is too complex to be named. In *165* (October 1967), which hangs next to it, a similarly scalloped edge constructs its point of view from above looking down onto the two cheeks of a perfectly formed buttock; when the figure relocates itself as the ground, a wave appears.

It's hard to tell if Hafif intended these corporeal and other associations. They are neither encouraged nor negated, but rather result as an effect when her precisely calibrated color and distilled form interactions meet a mind's eye. This consequent uncertainty keeps things open and facilitates a search; together they create an atmosphere of (Italian) design from the '60s that resonates throughout the room from color to form.

A series of drip-like extrusions in the small painting, *157* (October 1967)—a bit like the Sherwin Williams "cover the earth" logo—mostly feels like a cow's udder or dwarfed fingers reaching upwards. Here the figure/ground pairing shoves the haptic out of the visual with alluring taste to yield an abundance of sensation from the intersection of two colors in precise formal engagement.

An opaque greenish-beige "fingertip-like" figure in *192 (A Lecture Upon the Shadow)* (March 1968) hovers over a dark and cream white field. Close up, one sees how splatters are configured to create some of the darker areas; yet remarkably, not only the ground feels vast here. This painting doesn't oscillate, its figure/ground relation remains staid. The form is so specific it resembles nothing so much as itself and in this context makes visible how Hafif's endeavor seeks the limits of her subject.

In the painting, *197* (October 1968) the varied surface of the ground gives its singular "almost-drip" an emotional resonance. The form, which works either as a kind of "not-quite-drip" or a dense purple sky reaching downwards between two flat-top "not-quite-hillocks," has a finely balanced tension in its figure/ground relation; this creates a discomfort that is able to remain in play whether the painting is read one way or the other. Hafif's forms are so precisely honed that they are able to remain elusive even while their significance is a given. Meaning must

be *sought* from them in the language of forms. Just what it *is* or *isn't* here vacillates convincingly enough to propel us into the unknown, the uncertain. It's a kind of indeterminacy where to find the fertile ground is to lay open a question.

In the '60s, when painting's status both as an art form and as a means of communication was being challenged, Hafif's explorations quietly confronted the received wisdom. My question now is: did the climate then allow for these paintings to be *seen* at the time they were made?

In the back room of the ground floor one sees some of what Hafif cycled through in the early sixties as she moved toward the simplicity of the two color paintings. Strongly geometric and starkly contrasting lines and circles serve configurations that court notions of insignias, games, and emblems. Along with still other works, ranging over a period of five years (1961 – 66), the birth of her corporeal investigations can be seen here in a few drawings and color studies that sketch out the tensions that the paintings in the front room enact so clearly.

In the upstairs galleries, a series of related paintings employing circles and vertical stripes use other strategies to explore movement. Executed in different scales; in lavender on red, and turquoise and white, they act out a number of possible scenarios exploring the potential to enact the relationships—"tangent to," "estranged from," "oppositional," and "overlapped"—and refine those terms. They reveal a subject in formation as the parameters are being staked out.

22 (1963), a sixteen-squared grid with circles in the four center squares engages in play, setting up a game-like matrix in which to find both relations and variations within a limited set of terms. Easily described, its configuration spins out a number of complexities in short order, prompting a revisiting of the whole show. In Hafif's case, it reveals an organizing principle of neither randomness or chance, but rather one within an expanding paradigm.

Looking back at Hafif's early paintings today I can't help but remark on the way the exhibition is wonderfully contextualized by two other shows that run or have partly run concurrently in New York. At Cheim and Read, *Serge Poliakoff*, an exhibition of the Russian-born painter's abstractions, was on view until the end of April; at MoMA, *From the Collection 1960 – 1969* is on through March of next year. A number of Poliakoff's works (from as early as 1951 but mainly from the early '60s) play with a similar figure/ground reversal, privileging neither but seemingly celebrating their relativity. Their very masculine shapes never challenge the flatness of the pictorial surface, as Hafif's do, and yet, playing with a similar pictorial device they exemplify the logic of interrelatedness. One can take off from there. Around the corner from Hafif's exhibition, Poliakoff provides an apt synchronicity that speaks to the relevance of particular kinds of issues at specific times, especially as they are being revisited.

Meanwhile, the MoMA show of the collection's works from the '60s provides a glimpse of some of what was then being championed as representative of the moment. The unique opportunity to witness Hafif's evolution in relation to Buren in 1967, and Eve Hesse and Beuys in 1968, for example, lends invaluable insight into her relation to mainstream currents and yields a deeper understanding of Hafif's quiet radicality.

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While she went on to develop a body of monochrome works of which the earlier two-color paintings could be viewed as precursors—in fact, they challenge more than succumb to conventional narratives delineating progress. While one could lament thirty-seven years in storage vault in any era, for artists whose investigations remain true to their thought processes, the career path is not cushioned and the rewards are often given to their audience long after the fact.