

# HYPERALLERGIC

## The Extraordinary Marcia Hafif

For Hafif, painting was a meditative act, a clarifying ritual.

Installation view of *Marcia Hafif Remembered* at Fergus McCaffrey, New York, 2018 (all images © The Estate of Marcia Hafif © Marcia Hafif Trust, image courtesy Fergus McCaffrey, New York)

Every now and then the art world seems to collectively smack its forehead, having suddenly realized that yet another under-known artist who, after years far from the limelight, might just be not only very good but exemplary. I've noticed that this tends to happen quite a bit more often with female artists than male.

Marcia Hafif, who died last April at the age of 88, is such a figure. Hafif was often pigeonholed as a monochrome painter, which tended to place her in a rather narrow, even anachronistic niche. A more accurate description would be a brilliant, highly sensitive artist with a strong conceptual bent, Buddhist inclinations, real wisdom, serious painterly chops, and an extraordinary understanding of and feeling for color; a polymath who realized her ideas concretely and sensually not only in paintings (including monochromes) but also in photographs, drawings, sculptures, text-based works, creative writing, experimental films, and installations.

More embraced in Europe (where she exhibited regularly) than in the US (where she exhibited sporadically), Hafif had a significant yet under-the-radar career for much of her professional life. That began to change over the last several years. Her painting installation, "An Extended Gray Scale" (1973), presented by Fergus McCaffrey Gallery at the 2015 Art Basel Unlimited, positively floored many visitors and was a highlight of that art fair. One hundred and six identically sized gray paintings ranging from very light to very dark with all sorts of gradations in between wrapped around the exhibition space's walls like a horizon line, or perhaps a really long film strip.

Installation view of *Marcia Hafif Remembered* at Fergus McCaffrey, New York, 2018

Also in 2015 was the exhibition *Marcia Hafif: From the Inventory* (hilariously, Hafif referred to her finished works as her "inventory") at the Laguna Art

Museum, which helped to re-introduce her art to Southern California, where she was born and raised (in Pomona), worked in the late 1950s as an occasional assistant at the legendary Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, and studied art between 1969 and 1971 at University of California, Irvine. (Robert Irwin was one of her professors; perhaps she learned a thing or two from him about color and seeing.) From 1999 on she divided her time between New York and Laguna Beach.

Hafif's first exhibition at the big time, highly visible Fergus McCaffrey in New York in 2016 was especially key; the exhibition showcased an impressive body of vibrant, rarely seen abstract paintings that Hafif made while living in Rome from 1961 to 1969, some featuring hill shapes inspired by hilly Rome and none of them monochromes. Interestingly, although I met Hafif in the early 1990s, became friends with her, had studio visits, quickly grew enthralled with her work, and went to every exhibition of hers that I could, I never saw or heard an inkling about these thoughtful and quietly dynamic paintings from the 1960s. For me, and I gather for quite a number of others, the Fergus McCaffrey exhibition was a total revelation.

Dual Swiss museum exhibitions at Kunstmuseum St. Gallen and Kunsthaus Baselland in 2017 situated Hafif's paintings in an expanded context that also included drawings and photographs. A recent posthumous exhibition at Lenbachhaus in Munich centered on Hafif's experimental films. Her current exhibition *Marcia Hafif: A Place Apart* at the Pomona College (her alma mater) Museum of Art, for which she intensely collaborated with the curators, features paintings but also drawings, sketches, photographs, and maps; many of these works have not been previously exhibited. I suspect that in the coming years Hafif's reputation will continue to rise, perhaps considerably so, as the full (or a fuller) scope of her vision comes into focus.

Marcia Hafif's exhibition now at Fergus McCaffrey, her second solo there, is titled *Marcia Hafif Remembered*. Curated by Alanna Heiss, founder and Director of Clocktower Productions and previously founder and Director of MoMA PS1 (formerly P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center); artist Hanne Tierney; and artist Richard Nonas, three longtime friends who knew her work through and through, *Marcia Hafif: Remembered* is not a retrospective and makes no attempt to sum up her achievement. Instead, four distinct bodies of paintings from different periods, along with four oil on canvas monochromes from 1973 and 1974, are dispersed across the gallery's two floors; they reveal her career-long investigation and reappraisal of what exactly a painting is, marked by intellectual rigor, a careful analysis of and extraordinary feeling for colors and materials, and a rhythmic, repetitive, and precise handling of paint. They also reveal how adventurous she was as she developed her austere, sensuous, and lively aesthetic.

Upstairs are four large paintings from Hafif's 1979-80 "Black Paintings" series. From a distance it is easy to perceive them as black monochromes, updated takes on Kazimir Malevich, Ad Reinhardt, and others. Look closely, or even not that closely. They aren't black. They aren't monochromes. They also aren't all that reductive. Instead they are luscious and layered combinations of ultramarine blue and burnt umber, applied with Hafif's signature short, vertical brushstrokes, and they are downright mesmerizing.

I stood in front (and sometimes at the sides) of "Black Painting: Ultramarine Blue, Burnt Umber IV" (1980) for a long time. From a distance it looks uniform and stark; from up close it is anything but. The dense mesh of brushstrokes seems to be vibrating and undulating. An ever-shifting variety of small touches courses up and down, back and forth. Nuances of color abound — not just blue brushstrokes but blue shading into lighter, sometimes near-white gradients; not just one tone of burnt umber but many, condensed into small areas. There is just so much to look at and absorb and it is best to do so patiently, with total openness, without any words in one's mind. Hafif's paintings — and this one is a good example — are not "about" something. They don't deliver messages. Instead they offer complex visual, intellectual, and emotional experiences.

Downstairs is a series from 1994 of 11 small (many of them 13 by 13 inches, others somewhat larger) paintings on pine panels, aligned in two horizontal rows on adjacent walls. Mostly tawny (in different shades) or gray (likewise) and made not of paint but instead of either tinted marble dust or plaster purchased right off the shelf in a London hardware store, they are entirely wonderful. It's fascinating how Hafif turned really basic materials into captivating visual forces, including a square of light gray marble dust that looks stunning in relation to the surrounding, comparatively bright pine border ("Marble Dust Paintings: Alp Green"). Shifts in color and texture between paintings make the whole series eventful. Each of these seemingly one-color works is again exceedingly sensuous and complex but in a most subtle way. This becomes apparent the more time you spend with the works and the more you open yourself to them, including how surprisingly lovely mere pine looks when juxtaposed with these colors and materials.

The purplish-brown "Marble Dust Paintings: Prugna" also features, on the face of it, nothing more than marble dust on a pine panel. Parts seem smoothed over or partially rubbed away; they hint at drifting mist. Darker vertical and diagonal bands are scattered about, almost haphazardly. Again, this painting, with all sorts of surface activity, seems to be vibrating and shifting, and the more you look the more you see and absorb. Nothing is representational in these paintings, but they still evoke — whether or not intentionally — things in the world: the way wind sweeps across a sandy beach, the facades of buildings, the color of the sky or of the earth in "a certain slant of light," as Emily Dickinson put it in her famous

poem. “Marble Dust Paintings: Coral Pink,” in which a soft pink square almost blends with the surrounding pine borders, is frankly sublime.

Right here is a hallmark of Hafif’s paintings. They are matter-of-fact and stick to the facts: this particular color, this particular shape, the particular way that brushstrokes were applied. No illusionism is involved. The painting is a thing. Still, Hafif’s empirical paintings have an emotional and spiritual charge, perhaps because of how much she invested them with intellect and spirit. For her, painting was a meditative act, a clarifying ritual of sorts. You feel this, as a viewer. Her paintings are forthright and no nonsense, but also enigmatic, multi-layered, and supremely sensitive. Not to confuse artworks with personal psychology, but that’s a lot what Marcia Hafif was like as a person.

“Table of Pigments” (1991) is, on one level, exactly what the title describes. Twenty-four oil-on-canvas monochromes, each 22 by 22 inches, are arranged in two grids on adjacent walls. Each painting is a unique color, noted on the checklist, ranging from zinc oxide and raw sienna to manganese violet, rosa quindo, transparent golden ochre, and massicot. Here is indeed a table of pigments, which recalls a color chart in an art supply store: these are the available pigments; this is what they look like.

But that’s when the subtle magic takes over. From a distance, each painting seems similar: an impeccable monochrome with a uniform surface. Move up closer, look really intently, and everything opens up. You notice small curves and swirls of paint, tiny ridges and indentations, slight shifts in color tones. These surfaces are anything but uniform. They are chockfull of changes, developments, variations, and diversity.

Across the room things swerve again, with “Shade Paintings: Group 12 (Scheveningen Blue, Silver, Flesh Tint, Indigo)” (2015), four bold, 22 by 22-inch acrylic paintings on canvas. The silver one almost sparkles; the indigo one is mysterious and magnetic. Nearby there is a startling inclusion, a shelf filled with hand-labeled jars of pigments from Hafif’s studio (“Studio Pigments and Shelf,” n.d.). The colors are gorgeous and the straightforward labels read like pure poetry: alizarin red, cobalt, cerulean blue, ultramarine. Here are Hafif’s most basic substances, and you feel just how much she loved them, how much they mattered to her. What’s missing is her. “Genius Death,” as Allen Ginsberg wrote in his great poem “Father Death Blues”: “your art is done.” That is the case, but what’s most definitely not done is a full and sustained appreciation of what Marcia Hafif achieved. In fact, this has barely begun.

Marcia Hafif Remembered continues at *Fergus McCaffrey (514 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 27.*