

## **Optical alchemy**

Marcia Hafif elected to focus her practice on monochromatic painting in 1978, founding a group which united under the appellation Radical Painting. Her poetic yet rigorous approach to painting is deceptively simple and richly nuanced.

There are two distinct ways to experience Hafif's exquisite series of recent oil paintings at Baumgartner. From a distance, the brightly colored, small-sized canvases appear to be matte surface monochromes. Up close to a single painting, however, delicate skeins of color reveal themselves as not one, but a pair of colors that creates a third hue. This is due to optical effects achieved by glazing. Glazing entails laying down one color upon gessoed ground – the “body” – followed by painting the “glaze” on top of it. Glaze consists of a shiny medium mixed with a minimum of pigment. It is a very old technique in the lexicon of painting.

Hafif enhances glazing's optical alchemy by preparing her gesso grounds in a specific way. The very strands of brushes she uses for this purpose create horizontal and vertical striations that are only visible upon close viewing. In effect, they form an even grain that plays a role in the viewer's perception of color combinations. A perfectly planar surface would not offer quite the same opportunity for color perception to dance at the back of the eyes. The viewer can determine exactly how many steps away he or she must be to lose the sense of two colors and see, from there, a monochrome painting. And it may not be the same distance, depending upon the hues which range from red, yellow, orange, blue and green to gray.

Titles for these works are resolutely descriptive, taking their cue almost straight from the manufacturer. Two very different shades of gray are achieved by the bluish “Glaze Painting: Cerulean Blue/Flesh Tint versus the pinkish “Glaze Painting: Flesh Tint/Cerulean Blue.” The manufacturer's notion of “Flesh Tint,” geared for Caucasian beige, provides a figurative metaphor that contrasts with the industrial/scientific nomenclature for oil paint. In the red spectrum, a base of Alizarin Crimson with a glaze of Naples Yellow on top gives a cherry red effect. The same red hue as the glaze over Manganese Violet produces a reddish purple monochrome, while Cobalt Violet glaze over an Alizarin Crimson base yields a deep pink raspberry color.

Hafif is a superb technician. There's something cool and systematic about the series, yet as it quietly reaches into the viewer's experience of color, it conjures a rare sense of trust and intimacy. The glaze/gaze of this artist is at once existential in its straightforwardness and vast in conception.

## **Deborah Garwood**

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