

parrasch heijnen

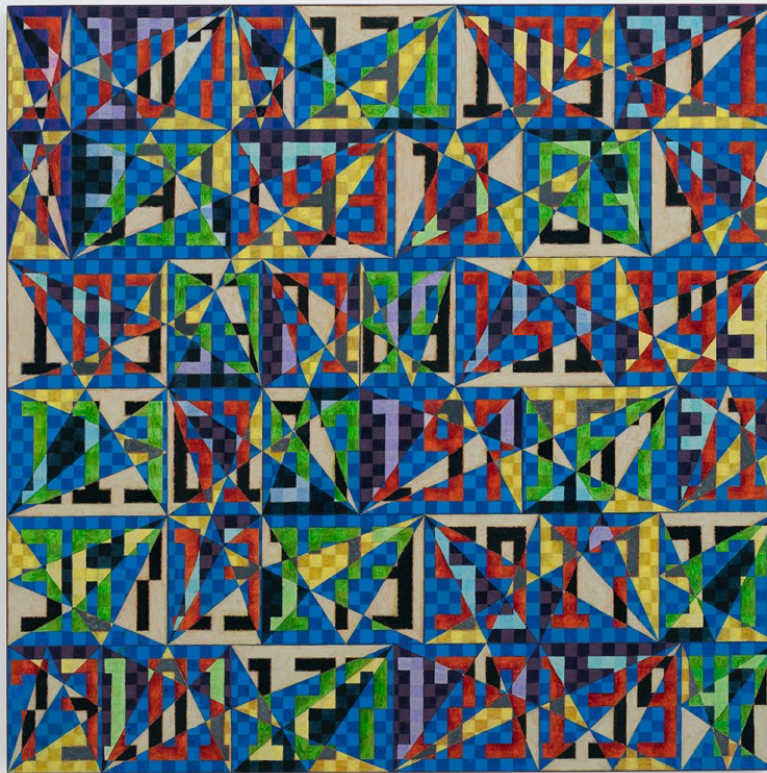
HYPERALLERGIC

Xylor Jane's Cosmic Grids

The rules that structure Jane's paintings take her to some place strange and fascinating, beautiful and perplexing, mind-boggling and riveting.

John Yau

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Xylor Jane, "Love Beast" (2022), oil, ink, and graphite on wood panel, 24 × 24 inches (all images courtesy Canada gallery for Xylor Jane)

I first saw Xylor Jane's work in the flat files at Pierogi Gallery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, around 15 years ago, and I have been following her ever since. She does not show often and I don't

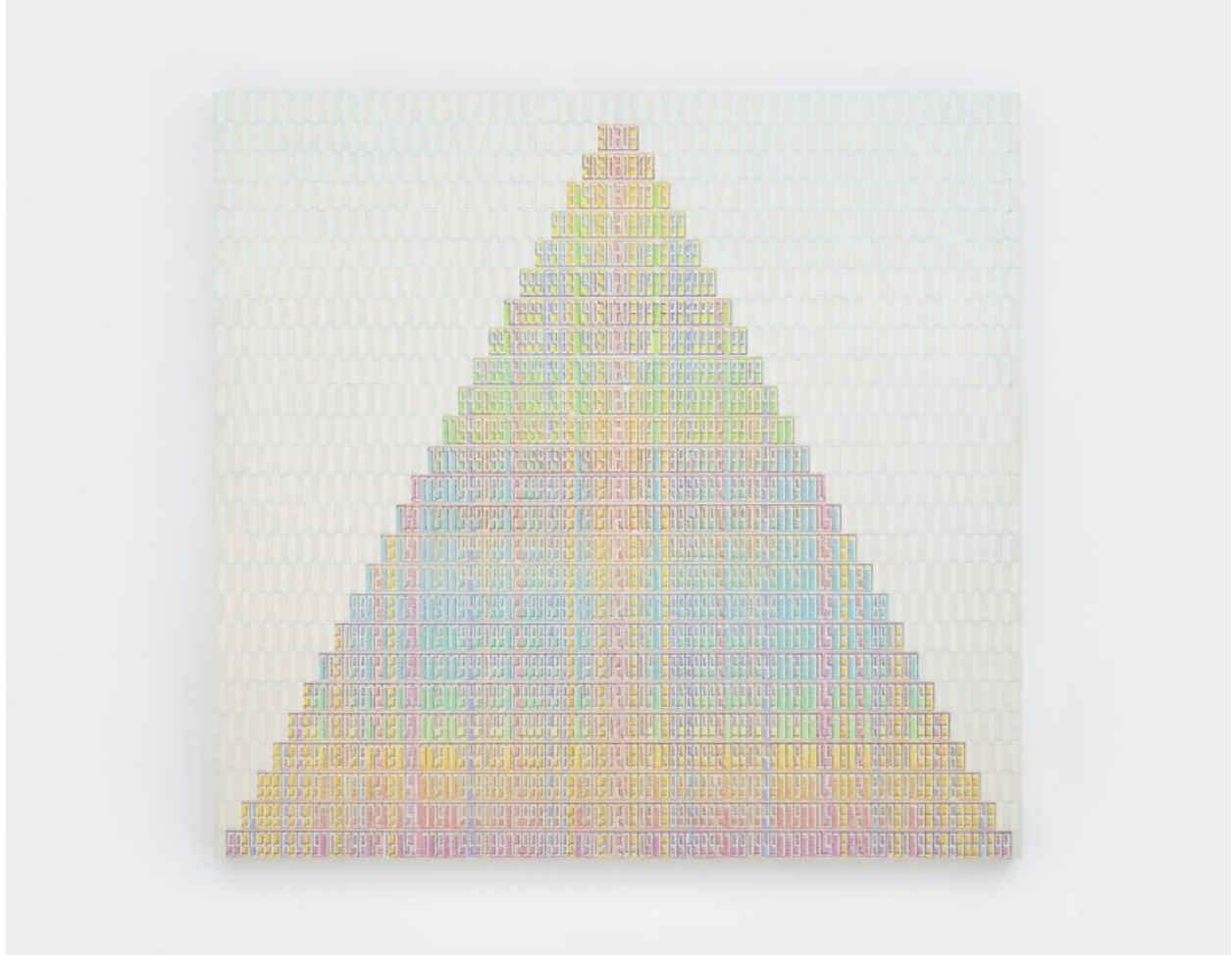
remember seeing her work included in any museum survey shows about the state of painting, abstraction, geometry, conceptual art, or themes such as numbers, magic, or the optical. I mention this because I think it is fair to say that Jane — a singular figure in contemporary abstract art — has flown under the mainstream art world’s radar. No matter how open-minded and inclusive its institutions claim to be, they and their stewards still have many blind spots. Jane, who has expanded and pushed her meticulously straightforward methodology into delightful areas of dazzled seeing and arcane thinking unlike anyone else’s, is one of them.

Jane is a rule-bound artist who begins with a grid and a vocabulary of dots and solid geometric areas of color. She is the heir to Alfred Jensen, Agnes Martin, Roman Opalka, Sol LeWitt, and Jess, but — importantly — she is unlike any of them. Her rules take her to some place strange and fascinating, beautiful and perplexing, mind-boggling and riveting. These are some of the qualities that led me to visit *Xylor Jane: Second Saturn Return* at Canada gallery (November 4–December 22, 2022).

Saturn takes approximately 29 and a half years to orbit the sun. Though not yet 58 or 59 years old, Jane is on the second return and thinking about the next phase, as the title of the painting “Third Saturn Return” (2022) indicates. In what kind of time do we think? What do we wish to attain in each of our Saturn phases?

Jane works in oil, ink, and graphite on wood panels. The exhibition’s largest painting (39 by 41 inches), “Untitled (25 Nesting Prime Palindromes)” (2022), is a pyramid of color-coded numbers, with the prime palindrome 32323 at the top. According to the gallery press release:

32323 is not only a favorite of Jane's (because it contains two twos and three threes), but it is also the number of days that she will be alive when she is in the midst of her third Saturn return in the year 2051.



Xylor Jane, “Untitled (25 Nesting Prime Palindromes)” (2022), oil and ink on wood panel, 39 × 41 inches

As each row increases by four numbers, the original palindrome maintains its position. The additional numbers form another palindrome, which is folded into the subsequent row, 25 in all. The color coding complicates the way we see the painting, as our gaze shifts between reading and looking, discerning and drifting, legibility and illegibility — the blurring whirl of daily life. The borderlines between reading and looking, precision and vertigo, optical and tactile are constantly under stress in Jane's work. Starting with a prime palindrome — something the viewer can easily delight in — the artist pulls the viewer into a territory of contemplation that is beyond

human comprehension. This is where she brings me. It is both unsettling and strangely comforting, though I cannot say why.

What brings this show — which is already more visually generous than most exhibitions — to another level is the way that Jane has complicated her approach. “Untitled (25 Nesting Prime Palindromes)” is composed of one system, completely visible to the viewer. In “Starling” and “Love Beast” (both 2022), she overlays a grid of numbers with a system of diagonals that both integrate with and interrupt the numbers. The figure-ground relationship in “Starling”’s grid keeps shifting, further complicating our perception of the painting. Finally, “Starling” is a “magic square,” as the four numbers in the vertical and horizontal rows and both main diagonals add up to 34, yet none of the numbers repeat. It is as if a magic trick was revealed but everything is still inexplicable. Magic squares date back to the pre-Christian era in China. On the wall in Dürer’s “Melancholia” (1514) is a magic square in which the four rows and two longest diagonals always add up to 34. What connection is Jane making by using a grid with a different order of numbers that still add up to 34?

Humankind’s attempt to find an underlying pattern to the universe has haunted us since before we saw the stars as constellations and asterisms. We live amid the collision of systems, from the digital to the ideological. Everything is under control and methodical, but Jane has no didactic intent in these paintings. We can see the ways she puts the painting’s elements together, starting with the grid, and on to the color choice and the careful application of dots that range from fat to miniscule. These are drawings done in paint; she makes unembellished marks (dots, lines, and geometric shapes) to keep a record of something cosmic. The entries follow a set of rules that are not based on known logic.

In “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” Sol LeWitt famously began:

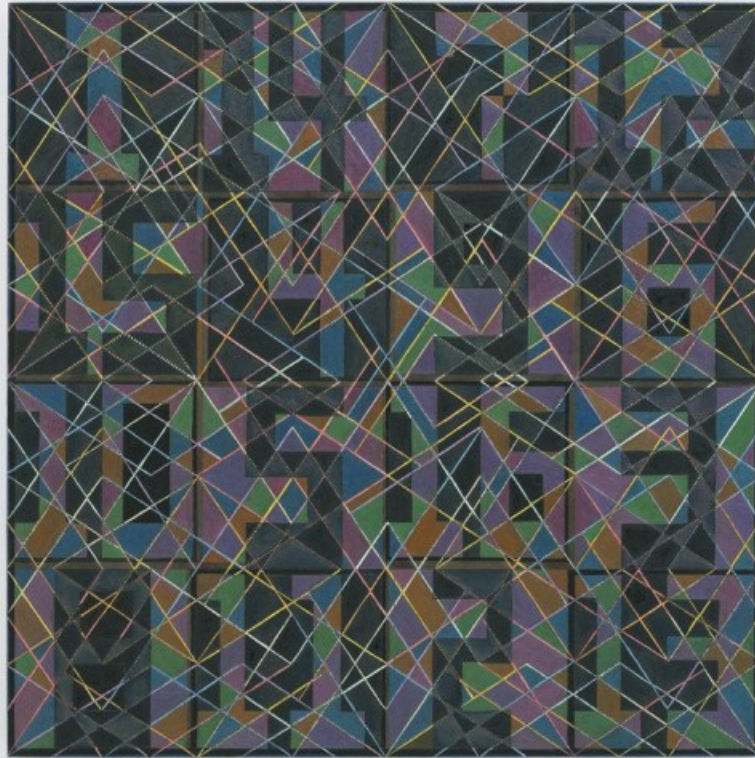
1. Conceptual Artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.
2. Rational judgements repeat rational judgements.
3. Illogical judgements lead to new experience.
4. Formal Art is essentially rational.

Many contemporary artists use rules and claim to be working in a conceptualist vein, but to my mind, they are seldom interested in the mystical and illogical, in the pleasure that way of thinking and seeing inspires. This is what holds my attention in Jane's work. No other artist comes close to doing what she does in the way that she does it.



Xylor Jane, "Tiger Twins" (2022), oil and graphite on wood panel, 31 × 23 inches

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Xylor Jane, "Starling" (2022), oil, ink, and graphite on wood panel, 19 3/4 × 19 3/4 inches

Xylor Jane: Second Saturn Return continues at Canada (60 Lispenard Street, Tribeca, Manhattan) through December 22. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.