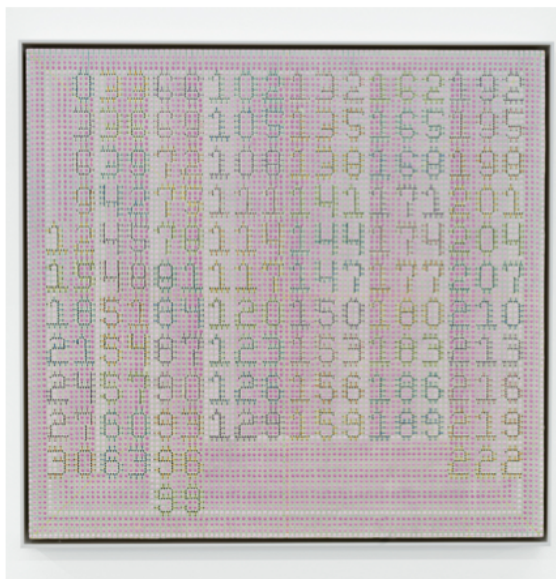


## ARTFORUM

XYLOR JANE: PARRASCH HEIJEN GALLERY



Xylor Jane, *Walking to Your House (Counting by Threes)*, 2020, ink and oil on panel. 18 1/2 x 19 1/2".

When tasked with explaining Xylor Jane's paintings, writers often start with the numbers. They explain that Jane uses magic squares, prime palindromes, and counting spirals to construct her systematic, grid-based paintings of geometric forms and numerals. They often comment on the exactitude of her nearly lenticular application of brightly hued pigments and wrap it all up with references to the transcendent, the occult, the magical, or the cosmic. This pairing—matter and spirit—has been identified by several art historians as the special paradox of modern painting. In her 1978 essay "Grids," Rosalind Krauss wrote: "The grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction)." Proving the staying power of this matrix of interpretation, one frequent writer on Jane's work describes it as the union of pure mathematics, opticality, and the metaphysical.

Yet "Back Rub / Foot Rub," as this exhibition of nine paintings was titled, opened up a different way of thinking about the work, one that foregrounds touch, the body, empathy, and states of intimacy. Geometric abstraction is classically theorized in terms that divorce it from the corporeal. Early defenders of abstract painting would often justify their forms through recourse to Plato's *The Philebus*, in which the philosopher writes that "straight lines and curves and the shapes made from them . . . are always by their very nature beautiful, and give pleasure of their own quite free from the itch of desire." A different translation, wonderfully, has that last bit as "the pleasures of scratching." Rather than placing her art into a mind/body binary, the artist instead asks us to think about the act of looking at or making geometric pictures as an experience adjacent to embodied feeling.

In *Walking to Your House (Counting by Threes)*, 2020, Jane renders the digits that fill the canvas with tiny dots of dark pigment, which are surrounded by a sea of slightly larger pink spots that fit snugly in the tiny squares of a foundational grid. Like an Agnes Martin painting in close-up, Jane's grid, resolutely handmade, slightly wavers and wobbles. The artist is a master of minute detail and color gradation, but she doesn't pursue machine perfection. In a 2019 interview Jane explained that she works by hand to avoid being separated from the painting by equipment. Making art the way that she does requires her to lean in "eight inches" from the work's surface as part of a process that involves intense intimacy, care, and scrutiny.

But why might one have this kind of connection to geometric form? German philosopher Theodor Lipps, a pioneer of empathy aesthetics, provided a theory in 1897. Lipps saw geometric form as the ideal object for empathic feeling (early on, empathy was not understood in its contemporary sense of relating to other human beings). He argued that our natural sympathy with abstract line was connected to the unconscious experience of our being upright bipeds, walking on a vertical axis. At the time, Lipps's notion was an answer to anxieties other aesthetic theorists had regarding perception—that it was hopelessly subjective, making personal experience incommunicable and the beholder alienated. Empathy with geometric forms gave the viewer a built-in mechanism for feeling secure in a world of objects.

Whether or not Lipps's ideas are accurate, I like them as a mental exercise for thinking about looking as an embodied act that grants us moments of assurance in a sensorially overwhelming world. While I don't believe Jane is anxious about subjective perception, she does work with geometric forms that structurally provide some certainty—the paintings are based on systems with rules, even though variation and improvisation are evident. The pieces in this show were humming, tightly contained events, every composition safely enclosed within a border. In each work, Jane offers us small moments of stability: kind gestures that, indeed, feel not unlike a foot rub.