

"Archaic Futurism" *Hyperallergic*, Review by John Yau, October 1, 2016

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Archaic Futurism

John Yau



Joyce Robins, "Untitled 4" (2015), oil on linen, 16 x 20 inches

In an interview that appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail* (May 2014), Joyce Robins explained that the title of her early painting "The Vly" (1975) is the Dutch word for swamp. The following month, I wrote a review of Robins' solo exhibition at THEODORE: Art, also called *The Vly*, which featured the older painting. This is how I described the painting in my review:

"The Vly" is made up of literally thousands of distinct, similarly colored shapes, all quietly jostling for attention. Nearly all the shapes are done in gray, with a few black and pale, nearly white ones scattered throughout the painting's teeming visual field. And here is where everything gets more interesting. Robins never seems to use the same gray more than a few times. It changes, however slightly, from shape to shape, spanning the spectrum from blue-gray to lead gray and everything in between. Moreover, Robins distinguishes each of her gray, black and nearly white shapes by outlining them in scarlet, electric green, sunshine yellow or bright blue – resulting in a kind of halation in which interior seems to brighten and push against its sharply colored boundaries.

After seeing that exhibition I wondered — and I don't think I was alone — whether Robins — who is known for her abstract ceramic sculptures — would ever return to painting. As it turns out, I didn't have to wait long to find out.

In her current exhibition, Joyce Robins: 'Clay and Paint', at 33 Orchard in collaboration with THEODORE: Art (September 15 – October 23, 2016), there are three paintings, all measuring sixteen by twenty inches, which return to the field of distinctly outlined, colored shapes of her earlier paintings. It seems these paintings mark both a return and the beginning of something promising. Robins is also exhibiting examples of what she calls "color lines," a twisting ceramic element of subtly colored hues thrusting off the wall, like a writhing snake, which she made in 1980. The combination of recent paintings, "color lines" made more than thirty years ago, and ceramic wall pieces from different periods, offer a more complex view of Robins' work than previous exhibitions.

Robins does something counterintuitive with clay, which we think of as a malleable material meant to be shaped or constructed into vessels. A contrarian, she tends to work with the surfaces of circular or rectilinear slabs, which she perforates and/or marks with concave indentations, as if she had pressed her finger into the surface. Working within these parameters, Robins has proven herself to be a colorist fascinated by the dance between vulnerable materiality and elusive hue, or changing light on water's surface. She underscores the clay's susceptibility to pressure by puncturing or indenting it. Although her work shares something with

the abstract ceramic pieces of Mary Heilmann and Norbert Prangenberg, she is really in a league all her own, which might be one reason it has taken so long to recognize her originality: it doesn't announce itself.

In "300 Circles" (1996), we see rows and rows of similarly sized, cream-colored circles, all of which are punctured and arranged within the confines of a black slab measuring 14 by 11 inches. A network of fissures crackling the glaze marks each of the circles. It seems to me that Robins is simultaneously marking and shaping time, and that the perforations allude to time's dominion over us all.



Joyce Robins, "Small Grey Cloud (Recto and Verso)," 2014, Paint, clay, glaze, 6 x 13 x 2 in.

In "Red Cloud" (2016) and "Small Grey Cloud (Recto and Verso)" (2014), Robins' choice of subject— a constantly changing form with dissipating edges – goes against what we think of ceramic, a fixed and hardened form. By going counter to the long history of ceramics, Robins arrives at something fresh and unexpected. What lifts her work beyond this gesture is her mastery of color and inventiveness within her constraints. In "Small Grey Cloud (Rector and Verso)," — which measures six by 13 inches – crackled circles nearly fill the mottled, muted green and pink surface. Although I cannot explain the association, the soft hues strike me as a subdued evocation of the colors used by Lorenzo Lotto in "The Virgin and Child with Saints Jerome and Nicholas of Tolentino" (1523-24), particularly the green curtain and red puffy sleeves worn by the Virgin Mary. Or, along another line of thinking, the palette Pontormo used in "Deposition of the Cross" (1525–28).

There are three circular openings within Robins' cloud. The crackled spheres — they are like knobs — protruding from two of the openings echo the overlapping circular shapes drifting across the "cloud's" surface, as well as affix the flat ceramic form to the wall. The third opening suggests the spheres can be moved around, echoing a cloud's changing form. Meanwhile, some of the circular shapes have a red halo, and their fissures are red. The circles feel planetary, evoking a sky filled with cosmic orbs, which is perhaps why I made the association with Italian Renaissance paintings.

In "Iridescent Oval" (2016), a nail can be seen in a rimmed hole in the center. The center hole is part of a grid of nine circles, four of which are colored shapes, while the other five are perforations. The outer orbit of three circles framing the central hole alternate between bump and perforation. The colored bumps (red, green and yellow) evenly spaced along the oval's edge infuse the piece with a talismanic presence. The iridescent surface evokes the sea and the sky, pearls and planets. And yet there is no symbolism to the piece, which is resolutely abstract. This is what gives Robins' works their power. They evoke the archaic without looking back, without being wistful or nostalgic.

In "Orange Red and Olive Green Disk" (2016), the rimmed perforations vie with the red, orange, and green surface. Color and physicality interrupt each other. In this and other pieces, Robins marks time and underscores vulnerability, attaining a primal feeling rarely found in ceramics, much less contemporary art. For while the perforations evoke susceptibility, they also convey determination and frustration. It is hard not to take those conditions personally and to feel a wave of empathy rise in you. It is Robins' ability to elicit these feelings that makes her work exceptional.

Joyce Robins: 'Clay and Paint' continues at 33 Orchard (33 Orchard Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through October 23.