

NOLA ZIRIN, *Assembling Chaos*

Essay by Paul Laster

A geometric abstract painter, Nola Zirin studied with the distinguished American postwar artists Milton Resnick and George Ortman before setting up her own SoHo studio in the 1980s. Born in Manhattan, she grew up in Brooklyn and, even though she moved to Long Island after marriage, she continued to maintain a studio in New York City until earlier this year. The atmosphere of the city—with its endless energy, chaos, traffic, soaring skyscrapers and sounds—has been a source of inspiration to the artist’s jazzy abstractions for as long as she can remember.

Zirin’s unique style of abstraction has attracted the attention of notable writers and curators over the past 30 years, including Cynthia Nadelman and Barry Schwabsky, who have penned reviews and essays about it, and Marilyn Kushner and Karen Wilken, who have featured her work in their curated exhibitions. Although her art has always been abstract, it has rarely lacked a representational reference, such as the bright hues, hard-edged architecture and glistening lights of the city, which almost forcibly turned her work from its biomorphic beginnings to the syncopated rhythms it now dynamically transmits.

Endless experimentation informs and motivates Zirin’s painterly process. Every work she creates informs the next one. She doesn’t work from drawings or sketches; she just begins by working directly on the surface of the painting, be it on canvas or wood. An action provokes a reaction, as Zirin spontaneously builds up her picture plane. Stenciled shapes are spray-painted over brushwork; selective taping defines hard-edged forms; and sanding softens colors while characterizing contrasting surfaces. She puts panels together at different depths to construct sculptural structures and then thoughtfully merges mediums and marks to make a rousing range of persuasive pictures.

For her “*Assembling Chaos*” show at June Kelly Gallery—her tenth solo exhibition with the gallery since joining the roster in 1991—Zirin is presenting a selection of recent abstract paintings spanning the past two years during the pandemic. One of the earliest paintings in the show, *Syncopation* (2019), picks up where her 2017 show at the gallery, “*Orbs and Angles*,” left off. The layered, spray-painted orbs are here—repeated to create a rhythm that flows across the shifting picture plane like car headlights on a heavily trafficked street—but the angles are now straight vertical lines, à la Barnett Newman’s stripes, that flow through thickly and thinly brushed fields of vibrant colors.

The 2020 painting *September Song*, which has the fresh feeling of abstract street art, carries the divided fields of color into a new realm, as the three adjoining vertical canvases visually capture a gaggle of ghostly ellipses and triangles floating through space. Taking it to the next level, Zirin's 2021 painting *Portal* layers a dizzying array of orbs, ovals and angles in a somber palette of finely sprayed black, brown and gray tones, while her canvas *Boomerang* fragments those forms on horizontal bands of beautifully brushed fields of color, which are dissected by the shadowy, overlaid shapes.

Zirin's two most recent paintings make further leaps forward. The joined-triptych *Assembling Chaos*, which is painted on two canvases and a wood panel, conveys the darkness of the pandemic on the densely layered left side of the abstraction, while the right side suggests a brighter, more hopeful transformation through still shadowy yet much lighter—and airier—tinted fields and forms. *Assembling #2*, meanwhile, is the first painting made in the artist's new Oyster Bay atelier. Mixing oil and acrylic and brushwork and sprays, it beckons back to Zirin's composition for her 2019 painting *Futurist*, which presents a solid painted panel paired with a contrasting geometric canvas. Whereas the earlier painting embraced the 20th century art movement for which it's named, her new composition combines all that she knows and all that she's done—with expressionistic brushwork, clusters of circular shapes and the atmosphere of a fast-moving train, which is ironically what now runs right past her studio door.

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