

NOLA ZIRIN

Play It As It Lays

By Lilly Wei

The walls of abstract artist Nola Zirin's studio were ablaze with color when I saw them in late May. May. Painting followed painting in a triumphant procession, several just completed. A preview of sorts for this exhibition, it displayed a range of works from over a decade of her production, with the emphasis on the past few years. I thought of Courbet's *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Life as an Artist* or Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, two masterpieces of Western European art in which the subject is painting about painting and the place where they were conceived and executed, whatever else they are about. Zirin's paintings are also paintings about paintings, among other readings and, if less directly, about the artist's studio, critical to the practice of most artists, even those who work primarily from their computers. It is a space valued perhaps more by women since a room of our own and all that it implies often remains aspirational, even now, and Zirin does not take her spacious studio for granted. She claims it as her sanctuary, its "stillness" essential to her process, and entering it is to step into another world, another life, she said.

Zirin is one of those fortunate beings who always knew what she wanted to do and even more fortunate in the encouragement she received to pursue her desires. She began painting as a child and has never stopped, evolving a dazzling body of work with a lexicon of distinctive shapes and colors, one series launching the next throughout the many decades of her long, prolific career. I doubt if she has ever had painter's block, producing paintings like an apple tree produces apples, as it has been said of Courbet.

Her paintings are often multipaneled, a format that she gravitates towards, no doubt because of its structural expandability. Here, as in other multipart works, she might alternate canvas and wood panels and vary the thickness of the supports so that the surface is not presented as a uniform plane but more architecturally, or as a kind of bas-relief. She might also add cut-out shapes that seem to be painted images, or the reverse, revealed only after close inspection—which the work demands—a *trompe l'oeil* that actively engages the viewer and asks most likely the oldest query about a work of art: what is real and what is illusion?

Her scale is also variable, from small to outsized and beyond. The multipaneled works often suggest a frieze or a cinematic roll as in *Syncopation* (2019), one of the highlights of this grouping. Unspooling as if frame by frame, its vertical sections consist of many widths, its bold and sombre colors advance and recede, heightening the dramatic intensity, its dissonant

rhythms almost audible. Such formatting helps her organize the infinitely adaptable and inventive abundance of her ideas. There is always a lot going on in a Zirin painting, from grids, stripes, hard-edged lines, circles, and other less regular geometric shapes to gestural brushwork, softer outlines, layerings, drips, and much more. Paintings have their own imperatives and she has always been attentive to them as she meticulously constructs her work, knowing when to take control of the process and when to let go: “things happen when you know when to let go; it keeps the painting alive.” It is a little like walking a tightrope, so much depending upon skill, experience—and instinct.

In her recent works, the balance between the illusions of paint and the physicality of materials have shifted, enough so that she thinks of these works as sculptural, dimensional. Her line/gestural ratio also seems to be leaning toward the latter, and her color scheme has been recalibrated, but these kinds of adjustments are constant and a matter of degree, integral to her overall process.

Color is Zirin’s particular, astonishing strength and she is unhesitating in its deployment: for instance, the drop-down slash of pop-off-the-wall red in *Mahoe Bay’s* (2023) which hijacks the painting. In recent works, the hues might be full spectrum but artificial, destabilizing, summoning up an industrialized domain and human production rather than colors that make you think of nature, such as *Mahoe’s Bay, Black Smoke in Blue Air* (2023)—which incorporates a sliver of real space to separate it into two unequal sections, something she interjects from time to time—or *Keep Moving On* (2022) with its alternating of primary colored bands and tangled black lines that points toward new monochromatic works such as *Still Counting* (2023), a geometric landscape that has all the color leached out of it, leaving us a faintly ominous, grey-scale sci-fi world to contemplate.

Another characteristic of her new work is its luminosity, her grounds glowing with a soft, satiny gold or silver sheen in canvases such as *For Ron Carter* (2023). These paintings are more ambiguous, visionary, many of the forms suggesting moons, planetary bodies, spheres of all sorts, appearing, disappearing, subtly modulated, the lustrous surface rich with spills of paint. These are not the urban landscapes that comprise much of her output such as *Light Between the Building* (2020) but more imagined, metaphysical spaces, evoking the realm of the Futurists, Surrealists, or the spiritual.

One of the great pleasures in looking at Zirin’s work comes from a mutability in which we can always see something more, her imagery in flux, interpretations changeable. Its emphasis on perceptual conundrums and looking attentively also tells us something about how to look at and respond to the world. But perhaps most reassuring is the confidence her work radiates, generated by her deep belief that painting and art matter, in service to the civilizing, better angels of our humanity. In an era of increasing uncertainty and shattered values, that reassurance is needed more than ever.