

Nola Zirin: The Sound of Color

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Nola Zirin, *Divine Light*, 2024. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 60" x 70"

Nola Zirin loves great jazz music—and so do I. But Nola perceives something quite different than most of us when she listens to it. She experiences the phenomenon known as synesthesia, which is when one stimulated cognitive or sensory pathway simultaneously affects another one. In Nola's case, she *hears* color and is inspired by this special ability to create the extraordinary abstract paintings now on view in her new solo exhibition, *Nola Zirin: The Sound of Color*.

I recently caught up with Nola to chat about her artistic practice, the primary pieces in her show, and, of course, trans-sensory perception.



Nola Zirin, *Last Tango*, 2024. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 60" x 60"

SW: Tell me a little bit about your experience as a synesthete. How did you become aware of it and how has it influenced your work?

NZ: Well, I became aware of it many years ago. I listen to a lot of different kinds of music, but mostly jazz. I realized when I was mixing paint colors that the music affected me enormously.

I started to respond to what was going on. And as soon as I knew it, I would move with the rhythms of the music—and think of color. I just *knew* what color to pick. You could call it intuition.

And now, in some of the new work in this show, I painted separate panels and *felt* exactly what panel would go next to another based on their movement and color relationships—the same *felt* manner when I mix colors and then apply them directly onto the canvas.

One such work is *Kachina Night Dancer*, oil and acrylic on wood. The vertically prominent piece is a balance of sloping, shifted forms in fiery oranges, racing reds, and bold, geometric swaths of black that is composed of horizontal panels, each its own painting. Though somehow, Nola has integrated every unit into the next, so that its seamless stack stands tall. I particularly love how its raucous and escalating ribbons, strips, and zips seem to easily connect and diverge.



Nola Zirin, *Kachina Night Dancer*, 2024. Oil and acrylic on wood, 48" x 24"

SW: Let's chat about *Divine Light*, which is gorgeous. It feels like this beautiful, balmy, high desert sandscape. You've also taped off some sections, creating this interesting secondary border around the painting. Tell me a little bit about the influence of the natural world on your work.

NZ: This piece was all about light. I used two different yellows. I walked into the studio and looked at it. And in one instant, I just knew what to do.

I put the paint on this brush, took my body, swept the brush right across the bottom of the canvas, and let the end of the black go right to the edge—and stick out. And then I stood back and said, “Yes.”

It was the right *movement* at that moment, which happens when you're painting, or building—or whatever you're making. But that piece is all about *light, openness, and space*.

SW: Obviously, space is at a premium when you live in the city. As a lifelong New Yorker, how is it quantified—and even qualified—for you?

NZ: Yes, space is compartmentalized, piled up, and ordered—sometimes new, sometimes decayed—but also broken up in the city. I moved my studio from DUMBO, Brooklyn, to Long Island City, but now I'm in Oyster Bay. My new studio is across from the beach, so I spend a lot of time in *open space*. I guess it has influenced me—it's definitely a better-quality natural space.

Last Tango, a rather different work, utilizes one of Nola's favorite motifs. It features a central, palmetto-leaf-like shape that is beautifully contained—but not quite. You can almost feel the fluttering proliferation of this pattern amounting to some semblance of an amorphous, organic form or space.

SW: Let's talk a little bit about the dark and diaphanous *Last Tango*. That seems like it's less about light and more about other formal matters.

NZ: It's mostly about movement, gesture, and rhythm—but also about geometric shapes. You know, the circle is important to me, but that's an *unfinished* circle, of course. When making that painting, I was listening to some Spanish rumba music. The rhythms in the song moved me. I watch tango dancing, too, which I love. I don't dance, but I love to watch it on YouTube.



Nola Zirin, *Framed Heat*, 2024. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 48" x 48"

SW: Tell me about the borders. What do they do for the work? They show up quite a bit in many of these paintings.

NZ: Yeah, when I start a painting, I'm mostly thinking about the frame and the edges—and isolating what's going to go inside. It's very interesting to me to work with the edges and then do something inside the edges. Those borders are like protection. The frame protects an idea or something that's going to go inside. Like a sacred space.

A true showstopper in the exhibition is Nola's large painting *Framed Heat*. Its title says it all but this picture is worth much more than the thousand words of this review. The volcanic square in the work's center boils, breaking the edges of the hot pink and dayglow orange strips barely containing it. The concentricity feels like a series of passageways somehow visited by artists like Josef Albers and Willem de Kooning—both orderly and fluid at once.

While nominally focused on the effect of Nola's synesthetic approach, *Nola Zirin: The Sound of Color* is a show of strength and an intrepid, vibrant collection of distinct works that could define several exhibitions of her five-decade career. My only hope is that while she's still active, a leading institution—like MoMA or the Met where her art is collected—will think to mount a retrospective, or at least include her works in a major twentieth-century abstraction show. In the meanwhile, you can catch these spirited, sense-dense works at the [June Kelly Gallery](#) in SoHo.

On view June 6 through July 31, 2024. WM

Stephen Wozniak



Stephen Wozniak is a visual artist, writer, and actor based in Los Angeles. His work has been exhibited in the Bradbury Art Museum, Cameron Art Museum, Leo Castelli Gallery, and Lincoln Center, among others. He has performed principal roles on *Star Trek: Enterprise*, *NCIS: Los Angeles*, and the double Emmy Award-nominated *Time Machine: Beyond the Da Vinci Code*. He is a regular contributing critic for the *Observer* in New York City and writes essays for noted commercial art galleries and museum exhibition catalogs. He co-hosted the performing arts series *Center Stage* on KXLU radio in Los Angeles and guest hosts *Art World: The Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art* podcast in New York City. He earned a B.F.A. from Maryland Institute College of Art and attended Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. To learn more, go to: www.stephenwozniakart.com and www.stephenwozniak.com. Follow Stephen on Instagram at [@stephenwozniakart](#) and [@thesteppenwozniak](#).