

ABATTOIR

Michelle Grabner on Gianna Commito, *Slip Lanes*
September-October 2023

Slip Lanes

It appears to me the highest completion of our human activities is that our play becomes labor and our labor becomes celebration and our celebration becomes play.

Johannes Itten (1919)

Lauded for its proximity to mechanical reproduction, then framed as “that strange episode in art’s endgame” by the art historian TJ Clark, geometric abstraction was foundational to the Avant-garde’s embrace of innovation. Its rejection of realism, the privileging of intellectual engagement, its cosmopolitanism, the exploration of color and shape, and its ability to eclipse temporal boundaries made geometric abstraction a compelling visual language in Modernism’s progressive drive toward experimentation and advancing cultural change. This legacy is what undergirds a wide range of contemporary geometric abstract painting including the work of Gianna Commito along with noted contemporaries such as Sarah Morris, Tomma Abts, and Cameron Martin, to name only a few.

Slip Lanes, a solo exhibition of new works by Gianna Commito at Abattoir, features geometric abstractions that are spatially, materially and conceptually rich, each painting negotiating a complex array of interlocking shapes and patterns, color and surface, volume and flatness. Unflinchingly, Commito’s paintings compress the history of geometric abstraction with nods or recognition towards Analytic Cubism, the shallow organic abstractions of Georgia O’Keeffe, and the Precisionism of Charles Demuth. Yet the paintings are admirable in their calisthenic reordering. Gathering simple geometries and motifs such as chevrons, stripes, circles, and triangles from architectural, designed, or decorative settings and rearranging these familiar shapes and patterns into shallow pictorial compositions is both the play and the labor at work in Commito’s paintings. What may appear to be systems of rigidity and design in Commito’s exquisite craft and firm edges is actually a world of wondrous ambiguity demanding active interpretation.

If we break down the painting *Kitner* (2022), we identify conceptual stability in a near-central planar fold that doubles as the composition’s vertical spine. This median shape consists of pink and light gray horizontal banding that sometimes falls into shade. It is not a unique motif in the painting’s complex organization of two-dimensional vocabularies and color contrasts. Four similar pink and gray vertical shapes are held in balance within the

painting's frame. *Kitner* also included thirteen small black shapes that suggest a void behind the active arrangement of interpenetrating planes. However, these little negative shapes struggle with their seductive casein condition and can easily be read as positive geometries. In addition, a few of the painting's shapes are flooded with irregular and brushy textures that create a decorative effect within a bold program of lines, stripes, and bands.

Assuredly, the principles of form and design are at the heart of Commito's painting practice. Moreover, invention is at every turn; color combinations, material topographies, spatial variations and the choreography of whole compositions. Fecundity abounds in Commito's paintings, and yet her inventions do not attempt to participate in Modern abstraction's embrace of progress, or Postmodernism's critique of it. Instead Commito's paintings require spirited formal interpretation. Their formal arrangements provoke us into thinking about social arrangements and political order, asking us to consider: Is there control without repetition? Does predictability stabilize or bore us? When is reordering required? What does disorder look like? Is pictorial space and its illusions more stable than flatness? This list goes on as Commito keeps laboring, playing, and celebrating abstract painting.

Michelle Grabner

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