

MELISSA MEYER | Musical Metaphor

OCTOBER 2, 2019 – APRIL 3, 2020



MELISSA MEYER

The lyrical nature of Melissa Meyer's paintings betrays their carefully considered and diligent construction. Expressing infinite variations on a theme, Meyer deploys two contrasting, perhaps even competing, facets of modern painting. She pits the rigorous modernist grid, conceived in the early twentieth century and revived by Minimal and Conceptual artists during the 1960s and 1970s, against the psychic, painterly gesture prominently associated with mid-century Abstract Expressionism. In her recent work, Meyer continues to loosen the yoke of the grid, leaving its horizontal and vertical boundaries amorphous and fluid. Her grid is implied rather than delineated. She fills these open, fluid spaces with a riff on the grid's opposite: the painterly gesture. Essentially, she relaxes the usually hieratic, regulatory nature of the oft confining lattice. At the same time, Meyer harnesses the psychological intensity, frequently associated with the masculine, that became a standard of mid-20th century abstraction. She controls her brush's movements in a deftly measured manner reminiscent of Chinese calligraphic painting with all its literary and intellectual connotations. The qualities of Meyer's gestural markings, while totally abstract, have been likened to written language and hieroglyphs. According to the artist, her marks are made with a purposeful sense of speed, ideally, as if created in one intensely controlled breath.

Such has been Meyer's signature approach to her retooling of abstract painting since she began her career in the mid 1970s. This was precisely the time that painting as a medium and means of artistic creation had been, like G-d, pronounced dead. At the same time, the modern, 20th century invention of abstraction was said to have simply run out of steam. Meyer was among an important group of artists, many of them women, who engendered new energy into the ostensibly spent idea of modern, abstract painting. Like one vein of postmodern practice, she reformulates painting, demonstrating not only the continuing possibilities of that traditional medium, but also reimagining the modernist invention of non-representational picture making. Her dialectical abstraction is at once a commentary on and critique of the past aspects of abstract painting, but also simultaneously a reinvention of it with full knowledge of gestural abstraction's rich artistic history, its inherent chauvinist assumptions, as well as its endless aesthetic options.

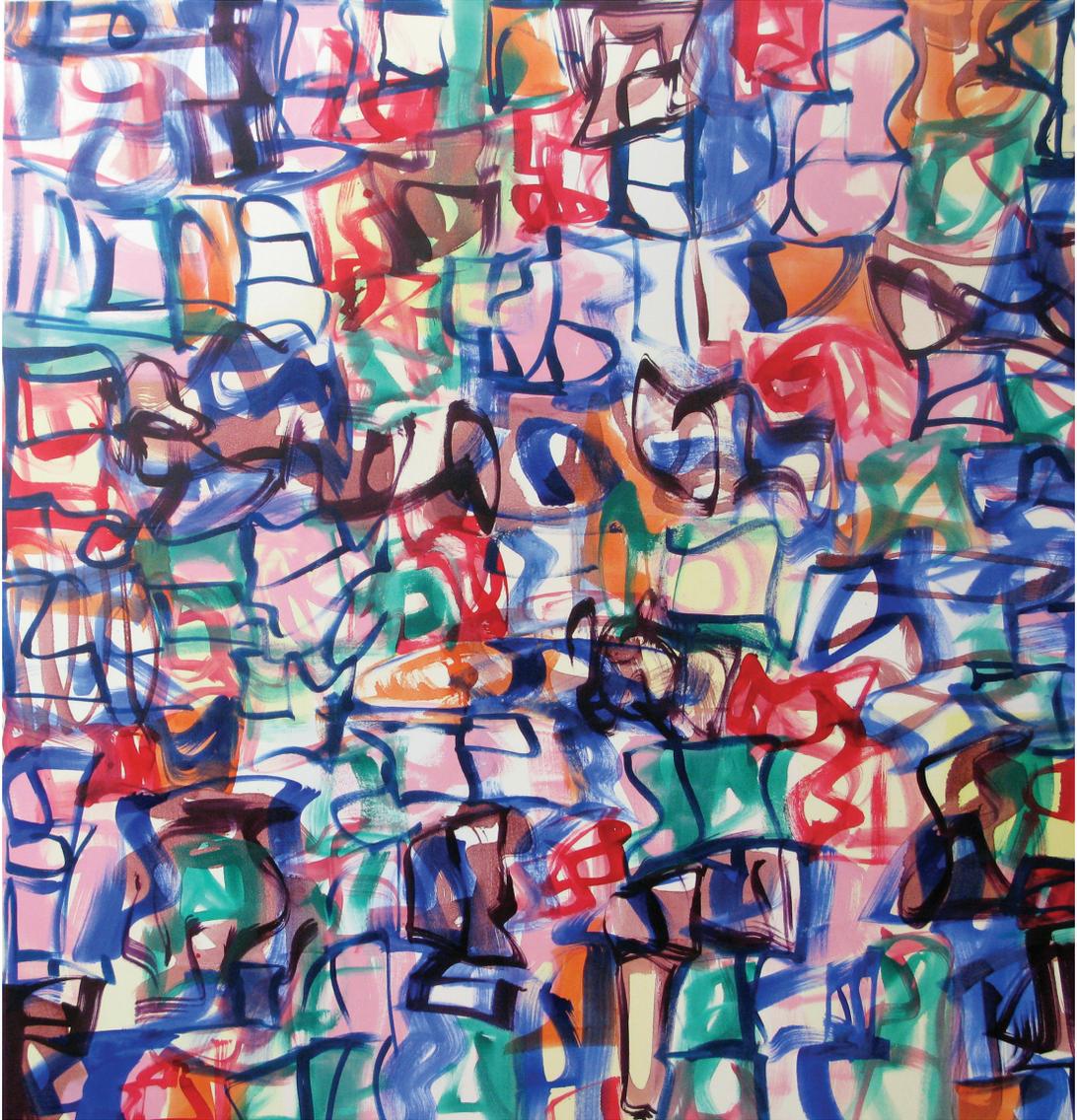


Vivace, 2015, Oil on canvas, 80 x 78 inches

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Tracks, 2015, Oil on canvas, 78 x 80 inches



Times Square, 2011, Oil on canvas, 80 x 78 inches

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Despite certain important modernist critics' warning against cross-pollination among different art forms, Meyer's work has for many viewers, presented musical associations. One might think of her amorphous grid as a vague musical staff in which her gestural applications of color are sometimes singular and contained as in *Jocund* of 2015, in this display. Other times as in the painting *Times Square* of 2011, her stokes, gestures, and paint layers overlap, creating complex color combinations and harmonies. Musical connotations and explanations appear frequently in the writings about Meyer and discussions of her art. Her work has been associated with both classical and modern music. Terms such as "scherzo," "jazz," and "improvisation" pepper the literature on Meyer. So too do related terms like "performance" and "dance." The artist's musical references range widely, from the songs of the popular vocalist Smokey Robinson to the compositions and ideas of composer Ned Rorem. By musical analogy, Meyer's art —whether her large-scale murals or her delicate watercolors — is rarely symphonic in quality. Rather it conveys the intimacy of chamber music.

Meyer relates her adaptive redeployment of abstract painting to the work of young jazz musicians. Jazz, that once avant-garde musical strategy has by now become a traditional medium. However, like abstract painting, its hybrid and improvisatory structure allows for endless variations on both themes used and techniques engaged. Meyer's devotion to yoga, in which the individual's process of breathing itself are inextricably connected, inform her art making process as a physically and mentally controlled action on the canvas. Thus, Meyer's process is the inverse of the iconic emotionally expressive action painting associated with the Abstract Expressionists. Their actions, forerunners of performance art, were a means of allowing the uncontrolled psyche to be vented directly onto the canvas. On the other hand, Meyer's commitment to the Buddhist practice of yoga is a merging of physical and mental control through meditation and breathing in an entirely original, alternative form of *action* perfectly suited to postmodern abstraction.

NORMAN L. KLEEBLATT



Summer in the City I, 2018, Oil on canvas, 80 x 60 inches

Cover: *Jocund*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 84 x 120 inches, total size, diptych, (detail)

499 PARK AVENUE / The Lobby Gallery

Park Avenue and 59th Street, New York, NY 10022

Gallery hours: Monday - Friday, 8:00 AM - 6:00 PM

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

499 Park Avenue, through its exhibition program, actively contributes to the cultural community as an expression of ongoing commitment to excellence in the visual arts and architecture.

We thank the artist, Melissa Meyer, for the loan of these paintings.

CURATORS Jay Grimm, Jay Grimm Art Advisory; Lenore Goldberg, Hines

ESSAY Norman L. Kleeblatt

ABOUT NORMAN L. KLEEBLATT

Norman L. Kleeblatt is a fine art curator and critic based in New York City. A long-term curator at the Jewish Museum in New York, he served as the Susan and Elihu Rose Chief Curator from 2005 to 2017. Kleeblatt has published in *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *ARTnews*, *Art Journal*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*.

ABOUT JAY GRIMM ART ADVISORY

Jay Grimm is an independent arts professional with more than 25 years of experience in the New York gallery world.

For more information about this exhibition and program, please contact Jay@jaygrimm.com, (T): 917.690.0035.



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