

ARTFORUM

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Marcia Hafif

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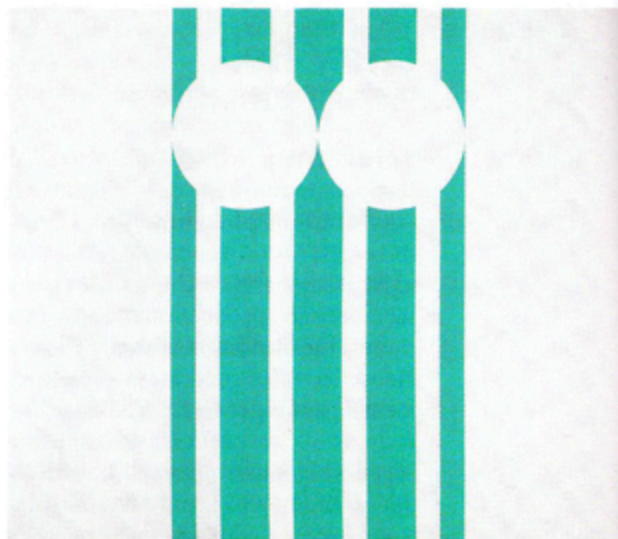
American abstract women painters were out in full force in New York this spring, from the bold engagement with Minimalism by the young artist Nathalie Provosty in a knockout show at Nathalie Karg Gallery to the impressive five-decade mini-survey of Lee Krasner at Robert Miller Gallery. Patient amid this bounty is a painter's painter, Marcia Hafif, in an exhibition dedicated to a group of works she made during an eight-year sabbatical in Rome in the 1960s, where she lived off a monthly stipend of \$150 from her recent divorce and created a distinctive brand of "Pop Minimal" abstraction. Her art from this period remained in storage in Europe until 2001, and this is the first time the fifty-some paintings and drawings have been exhibited in the US. Don't miss it.

Hafif is now in her late eighties and still painting prolifically. If her recent monochromes (shown in 2015 in New York) take their color cues from the northern Italian softness of Fra Angelico and the stucco wall paint of Rome, her 1960s production has a graphic vibrancy akin to the southern city's street life: bright greens, yellows, purples, reds, and blues—more Alfa Romeo than monastery fresco.

They delight in their curves whether, like the work of Huguette Caland and Paul Feeley, impishly suggesting body parts, landscapes (Hafif calls these "hills," after Rome's seven, no doubt), slow blobs, or board games. Three terrific exceptions are early straight-edged experiments: *I.*, (*Mixed*) and *G.*, (*Bread*), both 1962, lacquer, tape, and paper collages on wood, resemble a cross between Sylvia Plimack Mangold's floors and Louise Nevelson's and Robert Rauschenberg's cardboard constructions. And *27.*, 1963—a massive square canvas with an X and a bar running through its center in dark green and black, as if a head-on collision of two arrows—flexes its Minimalist muscle.

Hafif's paintings are self-possessed, but they do not feel aloof. Or lonely: Each seems to relate to another through shifts in ratio and hue, as if we are looking at them with adjustable binoculars and color wheels. Take three paintings from 1967: *165.* is a small canvas in which a double-curved red form, not unlike butt cheeks, rests on a green field (or, as with all of her paintings, the reverse is possible, and a peaked green form nudges a curved red one). We then encounter the much larger *168.*, in which the same looped shape is seen from a greater distance, so that the "negative" space appears to be a mountain form (now red) with three peaks. A similar shape is found in *158.*, except now it's yellow, and the cheeks (now bright green) more resemble the upper torso of a woman leaning forward. In *157.*, 1967, purple chutes extend down a red field, evok-

Marcia Hafif, *43.*, (*Far*), 1964, acrylic on canvas, 66 7/8 × 78 3/4".



ing an udder, a cartoon paint pour, or a balloon animal with one too many legs. 197., 1968, seems to show a single drip, or maybe two mountains. Hafif is always one witty step ahead of us.

This is not to say that these paintings aren't serious. Their exacting execution and intersections, their serial experimentations with form and color and size and application (sometimes using spray paint), have the systematic intellectual discipline of the '60s nonobjective art happening on both sides of the pond. Writing about the importance of abstraction in a 1978 essay, "Beginning Again," in these pages, Hafif argued that a painting "must stand up to certain criteria" and must "also exist as an historical statement."

If only more historical statements were so enjoyable. Upstairs in the show, 43., (*Far*), 44., (*Near*), and 45., (*Nearer*), all nearly seven feet wide and all made within two months of one another in 1964, exhibit subtle figure/ground permutations. Each of these uniquely colored canvases has the same basic pattern of a pair of circles on a band, with two lines of the same color running vertically through them, but we are at a different vantage point in each: zoomed way out with lots of extra space in 43., a little closer in 44., and directly confronting the spheres in 45.. We don't move, but the works bring our focus in by degrees. This is no small power.

—Prudence Peiffer