



ART REVIEW: Marcelyn McNeil Paintings Dance into Depth at Kathryn Markel

November 6, 2015

by Charles A. Riley II

Pondering the three-dimensional depths of paintings made this year by Marcelyn McNeil, on view through November 28, 2015 at Kathryn Markel Fine Arts in Chelsea, I was once again envious of art history students exposed for the first time to the birth and rebirth of perspectival space, from Masaccio through Leonardo. There is nothing to compare with the first-time fascination of discovering all the hocus-pocus of synthetic and artificial perspective: one- and two-point vanishing points, closing one eye, boxes with oblique angles and windows to the Tuscan countryside.

This wave of envy assailed me as I savored "[Lookers](#)," the provocative title of this solo exhibition of McNeil's exuberant work. These bold forays into abstraction mess marvelously with the planar realities of oil on canvas. Pictorial space and illusion have often parted ways in the time of abstraction, only to be reunited by clever topologists like McNeil, who twist and toy with our perceptions in ways that never cease to delight. If the diagrams of perspective tend to emphasize the Cartesian grid, McNeil reminds us that, especially for Leonardo, the S-curve was a major pathway into the third dimension of pictorial space.

As a keynote, consider *Inside Out*, wings extended to fill a six-foot wide plane with contrasting forms in loud blues and reds hinged just off-center to lean in to the viewer at a distance. If the viewer takes the the hint to approach, the means of pumping volume into those colors (veils and layers of bright, related tones) disclose themselves.



"Inside Out" by Marcelyn McNeil, 2015. Oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches.

Shifting Ground plays the volumetric potential of chromatic dissonance to the hilt, rocking the Miroesque biomorphs around a white center that does hold, albeit precariously. In *Uh Huh*, that white core has grown, obscuring a channel of red that enters and leaves the work from the lower left to the upper right. Blues seep into green along the edges, while drips play havoc with the clean, taped edges.



“Shifting Ground” by Marcelyn McNeil, 2015. Oil on canvas, 54 x 52 inches.



“Uh Huh” by Marcelyn McNeil, 2015. Oil on canvas, 54 x 52 inches.

Incapable of resisting blue in nearly any form or iteration, I was immediately drawn to *In Unison*, a boldly graphic exploration of half a dozen overtones on the opaque, slightly slate-tinged blue that thrusts itself naughtily from the left edge into the cup of an opaque form at the center. Above it and to the right are pale pastel versions, and the edge of the canvas discloses red underpainting for the left half of the canvas while the right seems more pink (streaks find their way to the surface a few times, little whispers of errant warm tones in a cool chamber).



“In Unison” by Marcelyn McNeil, 2015. Oil on canvas, 54 x 52 inches.

The whole right side of *In Unison* reads like an emulsion of blues, blacks and whites running “in unison” along a ghostly image, redolent of the old-fashioned x-ray radiographs developed as photographs were using silver bromide crystals and fixed in solution. Its translucency is a stunning contrast to the opacity of the blunt, capped form that entered at left, testimony to McNeil’s ability to contrapuntally play surfaces against one another.

McNeil came by this compositional sophistication via a BFA from Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland and an MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Houston based, she just won a [Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program fellowship](#) in New York.

I particularly appreciated this bit of studio wisdom from her bio: “Considering ‘flatness’ plays a major role in my painting, it may seem counterintuitive that I continually think about mass and form sculpturally. If the flat shapes depicted were able to step off the canvas and occupy space, how much would they weigh, are they bulbous, muscular, lithe or buoyant, and do they have a bodily connection to the viewer?”



“Tangled Up in You” by Marceilyn McNeil, 2015. Oil on canvas, 54 x 52 inches.

This show is a brain-teaser rather than a blockbuster. There are few viewers who still have the innocent eye of the student who is diagramming perspective for an introductory art history course. For one thing, as post-moderns we know that the instant the texture of the surface becomes the focus of attention, then the illusion of perspectival depth is shattered—the wall replaces the window. The cinema and television screens are specially designed to hide this tell-tale flat surface and preserve the illusion of three-dimensionalities.

Abstract paintings that fold toward or away from us, with forms that interweave and penetrate the third dimension, try their best, especially at a distance, to reintroduce the negative and (tougher) positive spaces of recession and advancing forms, but logic recalls the flatness of the plane. We know better, but what a lark it is to be fooled again.

BASIC FACTS: “Marceilyn McNeil: Lookers” remains on view through November 28, 2015. Kathryn Markel Fine Arts is located at 529 West 20th Street, Suite 6W, New York, NY 10011. 212-366-5368, www.Markelfinearts.com.

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