



ART REVIEW: Mertes-Frady Paintings Weave Depth into Abstraction at Markel

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by Charles A. Riley II

The elegant circuitry of [Gudrun Mertes-Frady](#)'s abstract paintings caught me in its web the moment I walked into the [Kathryn Markel Gallery](#) in Bridgehampton.

The delicate, looping curves of the intricate large painting *Hour of the Morning* spun their magic over a lattice of tall, X-formed verticals that held the architecture of the work firmly but not heavily in place. It seemed useless to try to extricate myself from this Arachne's skill, and better to give myself up to the contemplation of her palette's silken harmonies of green, slate blues and greys. To struggle was pointless.



"Hour of the Morning" by Gudrun Mertes-Frady, 2016. Oil and metallic pigments on canvas, 38 x 40 inches. Courtesy of Kathryn Markel Fine Arts.

Mertes-Frady weaves ellipses with a thin, clean-edged tape applied with a legerdmain that makes it seem she is drawing with the material. Behind and within the tape, which skates along a crisp edge, the brushy application of layers upon layers of oil paint builds to a surface that has the depth and finish of encaustic.

The rhapsodic effect of *Skylark*, for example, is a modulated layering of smoky grays, dreamily brushed up, down and in zigzags in counterpoint to the sharp lines of the tape. A flash of gold streaks across a "sky" framed by the open angle of two straight lines, like the sudden cry of the skylark as it flits from tree to tree, caught for a second against the clouds.



"Skylark" by Gudrun Mertes-Frady, 2016. Oil and metallic pigments on canvas, 40 x 40 inches. Courtesy of Kathryn Markel Fine Arts.

Did I mention the metallic pigments? The delay is deliberate, because Mertes-Frady wields the golds and silvers with a subtlety that ought to serve as a paradigm and a lesson for others in the contemporary art world. Overall, although I love painting I recoil at the tacky overuse of metallic paint, having been optically bombarded at art fairs by legions of Marilyn Monroe portraits that glitter in the booths. Mertes-Frady manages to slip the metallic note into her palette as suavely as Igor Stravinsky found a way to introduce the jazz reed players into his symphonic works.

In *Skylark*, this metallic note introduces a flash of drama as well as the perfect counterweight to the cool, ashen greys, but at no point does it scream “*Gold*” off-key. Having already yielded to the intelligent linear charms of the paintings, my respect for the artist was enhanced by this chromatic subtlety. When abstract painting produces its light effects, it often does so with a purity that calls attention to what paint itself can achieve, one of Mertes-Frady’s great accomplishments.

There are many comparisons to be drawn between Mertes-Frady and other modern as well as contemporary artists. That pattern of X forms in the middle ground of *Hour of the Morning*, for instance, called to mind a similar use of the rhythm, in a much heavier black line, by Fernand Leger in his still lifes of the 1920s. The graceful interplay of straight and curved lines made me think as well of [Robert Mangold](#), although there is more information and incident in Mertes-Frady.

Then I thought of the networks of [Julie Mehretu](#), but Mertes-Frady’s work is far less busy. Finally I focused on the division of the space of the canvas in the apportioning of areas using overlapping geometry as mastered by an artist I have followed for some years, [Theresa Chong](#). Along with each of these artists, Mertes-Frady has a brilliant way of balancing the foreground ballet of intersecting curves and straight lines—the nexus at which they join becomes a moment of drama—with lyrical, painterly backgrounds, where the wrist is let loose and the brush picks up speed.

That balance of figure and ground is attained in *Nest #7*, its looping tape lines echoing across the canvas. As if reaching through an open window, the arcs reveal an interior, three-dimensional painting within the painting, atmospheric and rewarding in its own right.



“Nest #7” by Gudrun Mertes-Frady, 2013. Oil and metallic pigments on canvas, 42 x 44 inches. Courtesy of Kathryn Markel Fine Arts.

I would like to know more about Gudrun Mertes-Frady, but none of the various online sources offers much of a hint about her life or studio practice. She was born in Cologne, Germany, where she studied at the Academy for Art and Design. She moved to the United States in 1968, and has, in addition to painting, used weaving to create her art.

I was not surprised to discover that her work is in the Werner Kramarsky collection. I have long admired Kramarsky’s eye (notably for drawings), as he almost invariably discovers a delicate touch that is firmly grounded intellectually. The way that Mertes-Frady explores the grid, especially,

makes her the perfect choice for such a distinguished collection.

Today Mertes-Frady lives and works in Brooklyn. A cryptic artist's statement on the [Markel Gallery website](#) offers a smattering of philosophy: "I work toward the instant the work has its own center, its own logic, physically and intellectually ... Most of all I want my work to be about deceleration, in the spirit of the works by Olafur Eliasson and the Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, as a counterpoint to the ever accelerating whirl of our time, in which our lives seem trapped."

The "aha" moment in this sentence is the reference to Zumthor, whose masterful Brother Klaus Field Chapel in Eifel, Germany, used real smoke and timbers to conjure an amazing experience of depth. The parallel with Mertes-Frady works is clear: both control the arrival of light so precisely—that sparing hand with the metallic paint yet again—as to make it precious.

Approaching an artist who seems distant is sometimes easier via the drawings, and there are some absolutely superb examples of Mertes-Frady's hand on view at Markel.

Viscous, billowing clouds of white and grey mix languidly on double sheets of Mylar, which trap the light between them and set up a resonance that is every bit as compelling as the luminous effects of the paintings. The water-based paints behave "naturally" on the surface of the Mylar; at first I thought it was vellum because of its lovely opalescence. The paints seem to be still gathering their forms and settling on the surface. That suits the aleatory theme of *The Music of Chance*, for example, one of the best of the drawings on view.



"Music of Chance" by Gudrun Mertes-Frady, 2016. Water-based and metallic media on mylar, 19 x 24 inches. Courtesy of Kathryn Markel Fine Arts.

After many visits to her gallery, I would submit that Kathryn Markel's marksmanship when it comes to painters is Olympic caliber, and Mertes-Frady is another bullseye. Markel has a pet adjective for this type of highly rewarding technique, the celebration of abstract painting as its own reward, which she likes to call "juicy."

Returning to the brushy background of *Hour of the Morning* after spending time with the drawings, I found details within the latticework of the straight lines that were like the patterns on birch bark, revelations of the underpainting that are easy to miss as the eye follows the metallic path of the taped arcs. "Juicy" is just one term of praise for the range of effects this confident and seasoned brush can conjure.

BASIC FACTS: "Gudrun Mertes-Frady: Recent Paintings" is on view August 25 through September 18, 2016, at Kathryn Markel Fine Arts, 2418 Montauk Highway, Bridgehampton, NY 11932.

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