



# ART REVIEW: A Labyrinth of Memory Connects Paintings by Deborah Zlotsky with de Kooning

October 3, 2019

by Peter Malone

Deborah Zlotsky chose to title her current painting exhibition "[Now and Later](#)," a phrase that implies rationing, perhaps a reference to the daily routine of the artist's longitudinal method. Zlotsky's canvases take months to bring to completion. What may seem at first a minor detail of her process grows in significance when considered in terms of the self-reflection this process generates.

The connection is not immediately apparent, as first impressions tend to be (as many of us are loathed to admit) on a computer screen. Zlotsky's work, like the work of all painters, requires intimate examination. But in her case the gallery environment provides *less* than perfect conditions, conditions that counterintuitively enhance Zlotsky's work. For it's the glare, the raking shadows, and other unfortunate lighting effects that actually bring Zlotsky's art to life.

On view at [Kathryn Markel Fine Arts](#) in New York through October 19, 2019, gallery goers have the chance to see Zlotsky's paintings in person. Perpendicular brush tracks, embedded staples, burrs left from pulled masking tape: the physical imperfections of her surfaces become her subject. Each painting is a visual layering of adjustment and resolution. But the various stages through which each of her canvases pass are taken a step further. Elaborate processes revealed by pentimenti, scarring and other signs of manual adjustment are reformulated into illusions of sculptural relief, illusions that expand to a metaphor for the process itself.



"I could drink a case of you" by Deborah Zlotsky, 2019. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy Kathryn Markel Fine Arts.

Sometimes cubist in feeling, other times advancing to an Escher-like architecture, hard-edged bands of color are transformed into bars, channels and blocks, all of which coexist within a generally planar surface. Geometric in appearance, they bulge and recess in an axonometric shorthand reminiscent of Early Gothic painting. Tension arises between bands of color and their spatial articulation.



“Lovechild” by Deborah Zlotzky, 2019. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches.  
Courtesy Kathryn Markel Fine Arts.

*Risk Masquerading as a Promise*, 2019, a canvas nearly bisected vertically into a pair of flat planes, is prevented from full severance by a corbel-like diagonal near the upper center sitting astride what looks like an air duct. The border between the two is enhanced by one of the artist’s sparingly employed trompe-l’oeil shadows, thus keeping the viewer bound to both the dominantly flat bars of color and their sporadic sculptural suggestions.

The artist’s own reading of her jerry-rigged constructions is amplified occasionally by pseudo-structural elements resembling hardware. A detail in *Risk Masquerading* reveals an innocuous metal bracket, carefully rendered with appropriate shadows and a pair of bolts, placed as if meant to support the horizontal grey band that spans the center of the canvas. The literalness of its allusion to structure adds ambiguity to the painting’s dominant flatness.



“Risk Masquerading as a promise” by Deborah Zlotzky, 2019. Oil on canvas, 48 x 68 inches. Courtesy Kathryn Markel Fine Arts.

*Loophole* features a similar pseudo-support, this time a slender rod protruding from a lower diagonal plane and rising through the triangular void above it, eventually disappearing into an overhanging plane. It behaves like a support but may also read as a conduit, perhaps the bypass implied in the title. Similar elements are repeated in other canvases, each instance posing a rhetorical puzzle that compels a viewer to accept the mysteries of a spatial narrative that serves as a stand-in for the artist’s journey through her own pictorial space.



“Loophole” by Deborah Zlotzky, 2019. Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches. Courtesy Kathryn Markel Fine Arts.

All of this suggests that the paintings are spontaneously formed, despite their obvious use of masking, a technique preferred by painters who rely on carefully planned imagery. One may be

forgiven for entertaining the idea that [Peter Halley's circuit compositions](#) are the inspiration for Zlotsky's intensely colored bands and stripes. But consider instead de Kooning's late 1940s compositions, specifically [Attic, 1949](#), which was on display at the Met until recently.

*Attic* presents a congested cubist space in a highly resolved composition that conjoins distinct regions and volumes the eye can wander through. And like Zlotsky's *Detours and Delays*, with its understated plumbing elements, the eye scanning de Kooning's *Attic* will discover ladders, staircases, and other means of access rendered as literally as Zlotsky's rods and brackets.



"Detours and delays" by Deborah Zlotsky, 2019. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches. Courtesy Kathryn Markel Fine Arts.

How remarkable to find that two painters, separated by seven decades and considerable style differences chose to narrate their painting's genesis by alluding to a labyrinth of memory. It suggests that what makes abstract painting vital is more than a look, or a style, or an innovation in paint application. Visual thought still matters most.



"Sunshine Patriot" by Deborah Zlotsky, 2019. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches. Courtesy Kathryn Markel Fine Arts.

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**BASIC FACTS:** "Deborah Zlotsky: Now and Later" is on view September 12 through October 19, 2019 at Kathryn Markel Fine Arts, 529 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011. [www.markelfinearts.com](http://www.markelfinearts.com).

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