

Shirley Kaneda – Doubled Prisms

Abstract

This article examines the work of Shirley Kaneda, the Korean-Japanese American artist. It discusses various paintings from Kaneda's output, both from the 1990s and from the last 6 years, in order to draw out her concerns and intentions. In this light it also explores her statements from articles and interviews in thinking through her intertwining of both theoretical and painterly concerns. It moves from the context of her early work in the Conceptual Abstraction exhibition of 1991 at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, to the actual form and procedures that the work implements. Formalism, or post-formalism here, develops the means to deconstruct certain inherited tropes of modernism and provide a new re-formation of them, and here Kaneda draws both on feminist, modernist and poststructuralist ideas. This also has implications for the viewer and how the work frames and proposes material for an encounter with these elements. The bracketing of early and recent work highlights ongoing continuities and differences within Kaneda's oeuvre.

Keywords:

abstraction painting critical theory feminism aesthetic experience viewing encounter complexity Shirley Kaneda

I had the opportunity to witness the germination of Shirley Kaneda's most recent phase of work in the spring of 2016. We were both temporarily resident in Rome; Kaneda at the American Academy, myself at the British School there, a fact we both discovered only after the residencies were underway. Viewing the sets of gouaches she was producing in the Academy at the time, and the conversations that followed, reconnected a discussion about painting that had begun some twenty years earlier in New York. In what follows, I wanted to continue this spirit of dialogue and conversation and give space to Kaneda's own voice and intentions, drawing on her writings, interviews and lectures throughout.

What was surprising about the new works at the Academy was the sense of a more pared back symmetrical unity. Although characteristically this sense of wholeness, while potentially immediately grasped, would succumb to an underlying instability, asserting itself all the more once one examined the relation between elements. A shallow space was revealed in these pieces, like stacked flat planes – spatially 'laminated' – both asserting and unravelling the situatedness of figure/ground. Simultaneously, areas of quite diverse painterly approaches comingled – a watery dissolution next to hard-edged delineated stripes, blended gradations juxtaposed alongside solid blocked circles. While it might be said that these works ask analogous sorts of questions to the modernist project of abstraction it would be fair to say that they also negotiate very different answers framed, in fact, as further questions. In order to examine this process of thinking and working I want to look at earlier paintings from the 1990s together with more recent work emerging from

the Rome residency. Before looking at what kinds of solutions/questions these might be, and where they might lead, it will be useful to say something both the context of abstraction at the time Kaneda emerged in the late 1980s/early 90s and something of her own background. One of her first major outings as an artist was the exhibition *Conceptual Abstraction* in 1991 at the Sidney Janis Gallery, a show suggested by another New York-based abstract painter Valerie Jaudon (the exhibition was also restaged in 2012 at Hunter College/Times Square Gallery in New York, with the full roster of original participating artists).



Figure 1: Untitled, Rome, 2016, gouache on paper, 20 x16 inches, Courtesy of the artist

Thinking back to the very early 1990s, and indeed the previous decade, abstract painting up to that point would occasionally gain some visibility here and there, but remained somewhat of an undercurrent compared to its earlier status as a ‘vanguard’ activity. The 1980s were, after all, a volatile decade, with the first appearance of an aggressive marketplace which echoed the sanctioned economic voraciousness of the politics of that time. While the 1970s had epitomized an exodus towards a post-avant-gardist pluralism, the ‘80s veered from one dominant fad to the next encouraged by a newly expanded market as well as certain intertwined cultural commentaries: From the valorisation of (a certain sort of) painting early in the decade to its denunciation by the end, and the burgeoning domination by new media art and installation that was consolidated by the early ‘90s. There was also, as Frederic Jameson put it, the sheer ‘relief’ of finally shaking off the demands and expectations of modernist paradigms, a sort of quasi-freedom: ‘A thunderous unblocking of logjams and a release of a new productivity that was somehow tensed up and frozen, locked like cramped muscles, at the latter end of the modern period.’

(Jameson1991: 313) These were the contradictions of the time, and in many ways the very contradictions from which a show like *Conceptual Abstraction* was born. Precedents to such a show included Lilli Wei’s two-part feature, *Talking Abstract* in *Art in America* in 1987, which was important for featuring a diverse group of practitioners from varying perspectives including minimalist/postminimalists Brice Marden and Marcia Hafif, but also a new generation, such as Peter Halley and Philip Taaffe, as well as (then perceived) maverick

painters such as Mary Heilmann. Jaudon, who had been associated with the *Pattern and Decoration* group of painters since the mid 1970s, clearly felt that the time was ripe to feature a more complete picture of new tendencies in abstraction suggesting this group show to the Sidney Janis Gallery, then run by Janis' son, Carroll.¹ *Conceptual Abstraction* included - as well as Halley, Taaffe, Jaudon, and Kaneda – David Daio, Lydia Dona, Stephen Ellis, Richard Kalina, Bill Komoski, Jonathan Lasker, Sherrie Levine, Tom Nozkowski, David Row, Peter Schuyff, Stephen Westfall, and John Zinsser. There was a strong sense of Pop abstraction in some of the work, and in others a detached disposition (this generally being the 'conceptual' dimension of the title); and in most, including Kaneda's work, a complexity of visual events rather than reduction. In her case the label 'conceptual abstraction' was really a misnomer; the approach was far from conceptual, although like many other artists present in the exhibition, the work had, and still has, a relation to surrounding discourses.

In the catalogue preface, Janis stressed this broadening of abstract painting's orientations: '[it] shows a noteworthy openness to a large range of reference: to narration, appropriation, language, illusion, internal imageries, and the play of signs and styles among others.' (Janis: 1991) This was in the service, he suggested, of painting's renewal. Jaudon and Kaneda, in their statements printed in the catalogue go much further in suggesting a sea-change: the arrival of an abstraction that was not business as usual. As Jaudon suggests, 'To have an exclusively visual experience in the presence of an abstract painting is now understood to be an impossibility. Abstract painting is being transformed by an expanded discourse that acknowledges the significance of language. Language mediates art but does so at a distance.' (Jaudon in Janis, 1991) In fact it is striking how a Foucauldian notion of discourse permeated many of the artist statements in this catalogue. This was a challenge, clearly, to Greenbergian notions of painting totally rationalised by 'pure opticality'. Kaneda's statement is perhaps more acerbic and blunt in its assessment, 'The period of reductivist modernism is over and with it, the modernist 'self' of painting has reached its apex. [...] Painting is a framing device and is in search of a new self/model. The exclusionary practices which lead to modernism's (abstract painting) entropic collapse must be revised, in order that we regain painting per se.' (Kaneda in Janis 1991). This latter point was taken up in more detail in her own article *Painting and its Others: In The Realm of the Feminine* (1991) published that same year in Arts Magazine. In the *Conceptual Abstraction* context, the line was drawn between Greenbergian abstraction (often seen at that time as all that was bad about modernism) being an exhausted linear/progressive model, not only played out, but irrelevant in its claims to value, power and history. Rhetorically at least - we might add - as the reality showed most of these artists were much more amenable to broad inclusive histories regarding both painting and abstraction, including artists of a Greenbergian persuasion. Many of the painters present in the Janis exhibition also featured in the two issues of *Tema Celeste* magazine, again that same year, devoted to 'the New Forms of Abstraction' and there seemed to be a moment, when abstraction could reassert itself as

¹ Significant, in retrospect, is the choice of this particular gallery as host for the exhibition. The Sidney Janis Gallery was significant for the Abstract Expressionists and later Pop artists in the early 60s (which proved controversial resulting in protests and leave-taking by many of the older group including Philip Guston and Willem de Kooning). Janis and his wife Harriet had written a remarkable essay on Duchamp in the late 40s, to whom they remained devoted as the key artist of the 20th century. So the appropriational strategies of Pop and new realism, with their blurring of high and low could be seen as Duchampian continuities in many ways. Such strategies also figured in the *Conceptual Abstraction* exhibition.

complex, referential, and amenable to the changing landscape of discourse and theoretical tools.

Despite the periodic regrouping of some of these artists (and we might also add here Andrew Benjamin's *What is Abstraction?* Of 1995 which featured Kaneda, Lasker and Dona, amongst others), it was not quite a movement nor functioned as a group despite formal overlaps and visual connections. It was, however, the milieu for the formative reception of Kaneda's work. Rather than 'belonging' to this group of artists, it was more a confirmation of her personal investigations into the possibilities of visual differences and their interplay within a field, expressed as mode of complex abstraction, as she explained in a lecture at the studio school:

My purpose was to make a painting that didn't adhere to a singular field and that multiple spaces can be evident in one painting, producing a destabilized field. This approach can be understood from a theoretical perspective as being critical of the notion of the unified field to produce a figure ground logic that allowed for a gestalt. But it also comes from my direct experience of having multiple cultural experiences that I had to navigate which produced anxiety and lack of constancy. So, it wasn't just analytical but also determined by my personal condition which felt meaningful to me. (Kaneda: 2018)

To understand this more fully, it's important to recognize Kaneda as a Korean Japanese-American painter, and the kinds of cultural slippage that this entails. Born in Tokyo to Korean parents, and educated at the American school in Japan, this became a tripartite navigation of cultural references for her. Memories of brightly coloured Korean textiles, Japanese kimonos have fused with her encounters of the history of American abstract painting. Such hybridity and notions of the 'remix' might have some connection with the hallmarks of Postmodernism, and while Kaneda acknowledges this to an extent, she sees the importance of the experiential aspect of the elements in her paintings as leading elsewhere. Referring to herself as a post-formalist, (the prefix being not a denigration nor a turning away, necessarily, from formalism but in fact extending it) the work investigated motifs, which in turn are constitutive of form and colour, while at the same time acting as 'visual states of being'. The destabilization of figure/ground, the floating qualities (in particular in the earlier work) of intermeshing or overlaid drifts, and the montage-like quality of interactions, maskings, openings underpin the kind of groundless sensation of the operations. Kaneda's approach to surface and event and how that surface is made, or what it enables or presents - what actually appears and in what relationship - not only shifts considerably from series to series, but also displays, for each set, a finely tuned assembly of determined motifs. If individual works explore these elements as differences, then each contrasting series also work through difference from each other in terms of their collection of elements, as well as the inherent resulting 'address' of the paintings.

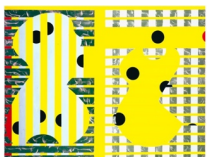


Figure 2: Diaphanous Dialogue 1990, oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches, private collection

In *Diaphanous Dialogue*, 1990, we sense a clear, precise image, vivid in its declamatory doubled space that presents a strict containment by its edges. Its forms (stripe, circles, body-like 'biomorphic' shapes), both collude and rebel against this framing of this enclosed space. All the elements here are held in contrast, between form and mode of operation: masked hard edge and brushed. While a certain clarity controls the work, it can also be seen to explore a form of interference, an intercutting of form, a disavowal of completeness through masking and interrupting. The painting's structure is a comparative one – in that it allows a comparison of its doubled image creating a further disturbance to a settled contemplative unity. The lattice-like grid interactions and its gentle optical flimmer, together with this bipartite form, slow the eye down, while the circles tend to bounce it around. Hence, this spatial simultaneity leads to a temporal one (though this is bound to be subjective on the part of the viewer). Colour, too, flouts any conventional harmony or resolution – the dominant, expansive yellow is shadowed by green admixtures, with red accents pushed out at the extremities of the edges; Framing, spatial and figural doubling, together with form arrived out of 'negative' shape, are very present at this period of the work. In fact, the repertoire of stripes, bands, bars, can be associated with the tradition of the field in painting (think Gene Davis, Frank Stella, Guido Molinari), though within modernism its passivity in relationship to the physical constraints of the work is turned on its head in Kaneda. Hence, as in *The End of Aspiration* of the same year, the Arp-like biomorphic shapes reappear as floating bodies, perhaps what was conspicuously repressed in certain aspects of such late modernist field paintings. Again, we might see the ground intensified into these 'figures' only to be undercut by the lighter vertical bar at the bottom, a spatial indeterminacy through the operation of overlapping, revealing and concealing.

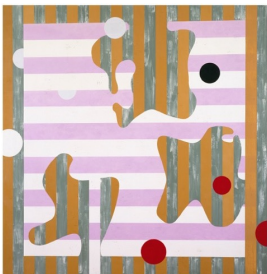


Figure 3: *The End of Aspiration*, 1990, oil on canvas, 72 x 70 inches, private collection

This wilful misuse of strands of high modernism within these early works with their bars and stripes, as mentioned, derived from reductive abstraction; the anachronism of biomorphic form, the displacement of aesthetic unity and figure/ground are each presented to create an embedded visual dialogue (albeit one 'in-process'). They are not appropriation, in that they are specifically invented, nor is the intention simply the pick'n'mix of pre-established linguistic codifications, which is simply language scrambling. They seek not necessarily a synthesis (at least not in the classical sense of dialectical resolution) but a productivity of relation and difference. As Jameson suggests - commenting on such practices at that time – this can occur, 'by the setting into active equivalence of two pre-existing codes, which thereby, in a kind of molecular ion exchange, become a new one. What must be understood is that the new code (or metacode) can in no way be considered a synthesis of

the previous pair. [...It is] rather a question of linking two sets of terms in such a way that each can express and indeed interpret the other [...].’ (Jameson 1991:394-395). While this might appear a little too programmatic, and at the level of intention it could be, Jameson’s useful metaphor of the ion (a group of atoms with positive or negative electrical charges in interaction with others), opens out from this, as does his stress on ‘each can [...] interpret the other’. We might say that Kaneda’s early paintings explored this dialogic interpretation with each set of paintings setting up certain methodological constraints but then allowing an expressive free play. Individual elements, therefore, had this self-sufficient intensity, selected for their ambiguous ‘dialogical’ qualities in juxtaposition.

Kaneda saw this work on, and refiguring, of inherited form as, ultimately, part of the painter’s armoury:

I certainly feel that many approaches within Abstract painting’s history were prematurely abandoned, or at least worked through very quickly, and then dropped. And for me, it’s interesting to go back and find out what can be useful, and through this kind of historical awareness, use abstract painting to maintain itself as a discipline. By using these means again, it can construct new meanings [...] by constantly rearranging and redressing painting’s means, the new gets elucidated... (Kaneda, 1996 in Ryan 2002: 133)

As I have already suggested this has little to do with appropriation or direct quotation, which generally focuses on displaced cultural sign values, and much more with re-purposing and re-experiencing. And such a historical awareness of formal limits and transgressions is crucial in the sense of seeing painting as a medium bound up with its past: ‘That abstract painting or painting in itself is a form that has to take into sense its historicity may turn out to be its strongest point. As a practice it has just as much possibility for intervention, where new knowledges can be constructed and old knowledges can be put forth in a way that emphasizes the bridging of old and new without sacrificing discipline and grounding.’ (Kaneda: 1997: 11).

Of course, tensions remain writ large here: between formalism (in its morphological sense) and historical consciousness, between perception and criticality, between identity and the demands of the medium, amongst others. Yet, Kaneda’s formulation of a *post-formalism* would see this as a *productive* field of tensions, and we might remind ourselves of Adorno’s notion of the work of art as a ‘force-field’ of contradictions (Adorno 1997: 233). As she had declared in the *Conceptual Abstraction* statement quoted above, ‘the modernist ‘self’ of painting has reached its apex. [...] Painting is [...] in search of a new self/model’. To see the condition of painting as a ‘self’ is to not only view the interconnective network between painter, painting, viewer - subject/object - but also the painting and its sense of world. And this world had clearly changed since the critical directions for modernist painting were thrashed out, as she suggested in 1997: ‘The painter no longer has to subscribe to imagining the ‘whole’ as a universal truth or law [...] What we need to take into account is the way the notion of time and space has altered since, for example, the formalist goals of Greenberg’s time’ (Kaneda 1997: 12); Kaneda compares here the experience of new media and the technological, and the increased complexity in thinking time and experiencing it, that this complexity involves an ‘ontology of difference’ rather than ‘one of simple unity.’ She continues,

And it is not that the complexity of time would cause the denial of the optical, but instead this complexity of time would call for both the complexities of the object and the viewing. [...] But the space that the viewer is given [in painting] is significantly different to other time-based media [...] enabling the viewer to play a more active role in the production of the values that an abstract painting might offer, compared to an already existing narrative within a more time-based work, where a viewer is simply to decide whether he or she accepts a given prescriptive viewpoint. (Kaneda: 1997:12)

This confirms the aleatory acts of interpretation, 'reading', viewing. Such modes of interpretation are 'not be confused with the claim of the meaning of a work; rather it is the acknowledgement of the terms by which the painting exists.' (Kaneda 1997:12)



The Assurance of Doubt, 1995, Oil and acrylic on linen, 76 x 62 inches

Figure 4: *The Assurance of Doubt*, 1995, oil and acrylic on canvas, 76 x 62 inches, Private Collection

The Assurance of Doubt (1995), as with other paintings of this time, reflects this more complex situation compared to the previous paintings, with its directly ruptured spaces and patterning; again, different modes of working methods and application are clear to see. The dominant light green shape, that almost becomes 'figure', is pushed back by the floating yellow patches on the right and the organic bars on the left, which together with the marbling on the right side, have a somewhat melting quality. As other paintings around the same time show, such as *Untitled* 1996, these 'melting elements' such as limpid white tracery, or mangled yellow bars in the lower left of the previous painting, appear to have their origin in a grid form; yet here they are translated into warped, knobbly, obdurate 'things', and no longer that of an empty universalized geometric template.



Untitled, 1996, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 76 x 56 inches

Figure 5: Untitled 1996, oils and acrylic on canvas, 76 x 56 inches, courtesy of the artist

Untitled 1996 has another trait that can be seen as continuous throughout the oeuvre – this blended sense of light – where the hard edge horizontal yellow stripes on the right could be seen as doubled and turned on their side, like a blurred detail of the latter, or reading it vice versa, a sharpened zoom (although it may well be beside the point to suggest sequences of ‘original’ and ‘double’ in these paintings); here, the ground gives way to something akin to neon strip lighting, destabilizing the other elements inhabiting the surface.

While we have no problem connecting these elements, their unlikely juxtaposition creates an unsettling experience in some ways. Adorno spoke at length around the persistence of *non-integration* in the aesthetic experience, as well as the individual work’s *processual* quality – it remaining in process, and not static, the result being, ‘the enactment of antagonisms that each work necessarily has in itself [...] Artworks synthesize ununifiable, nonidentical elements that grind away at each other; they truly seek the identity of the identical and the nonidentical processually, because even their unity is only an element and not the magical formula of the whole.’ (Adorno 1997: 232-233) Identity, here, is mooted in the classical philosophical sense, not ‘identity politics’, although there is a relevance of the former to the latter. In terms of ‘difference’, for Adorno, identity thinking is bound up with an identification with pre-given universals, the subsumption of the *particular* to the *general*. The non-identical is that which is not integrated into identity thinking’s systems, hence a *difference* which can be, if not exactly articulated, then glimpsed or experienced in some way. Hence the importance of the artwork for Adorno’s thought – its ‘self-identical’ quality, wrought through its own formal means, its own immanent critique, with its processual dynamic around identity and identification, resulting in its potential difference. And as language itself tends to favour identity thinking, the processual *force-field* of art, ‘mocks verbal definition’ (Adorno 1997: 233). Traditional formalism, despite its professed privileging of the specific object ultimately falls back on universals, whether Wölfflin’s interrogation of style or Greenberg’s undercurrent Hegelian dialectics or Kantian criteria, these tend to favour identity thinking: In that the individual analysis is always hinged back to the grounding of the universalized whole. Adorno’s formalism is predicated on uncovering

difference which also functions as a criticality, and his autonomy always intertwined and meshed with residues of heteronomy, with the ensuing abrasion *questioning* given universals and informing structures. This may well speak to Kaneda's statement in *Conceptual Abstraction*, and also her polemical essay *Painting and its Others*. This latter essay also contested such informing universals, historical inevitability, systematized or controlling criteria, suggesting that such idealised frameworks that informed abstract practices remained irrevocably 'masculine' with, 'a finality to all that can be said. Logic, aggressiveness, toughness, became the preeminent value terms.' (Kaneda 1991: 58) In seeking an alternative to these values and the kinds of formal solutions that looked to them, she was also conscious that the feminist theories of the 70s had played a unique part in challenging and, in effect, helping dismantle the hegemony of North American modernist formalism. Women abstract painters had been, since this time (and before) making significant and often unrecognised contributions to the discipline. Kaneda flagged this up, as well as asking questions about possible different models, values, inflections that this situation could create - regardless of the creator's actual gender - a different awareness of how practices could be organized. This also impacted on the kind of criteria that informed such practices:

Since feminine painting is propositional rather than assertive, it questions the motive and intent of the making: for rather than being authoritarian it wishes to establish the criteria by which to judge the painting before you, rather than all paintings. By these standards a bad painting is one that adheres to criteria it cannot fulfil or that are not of its making. A successful painting convinces us that this painting is what it wants to be. It confirms these criteria by clearly demonstrating that it is what the artist has chosen to paint consciously and significantly, and its appearance is not one of default, but of criticality (Kaneda, Arts Magazine 1991:62)

In 2017 she was asked to revisit that essay and its subject matter some 25 years later for Women and Performance, A Journal of Feminist Theory, she underlined aspects of the positioning of difference from her present perspective:

What is the relationship between art (in this case, painting), feminine and feminism? From my point of view, the feminine does not stand in opposition, nor is it "other" and the purpose of illuminating such a discourse was to argue that difference is not otherness, but rather it is about constructing a network of signifiers, drives and meanings that join together and divides in an enigmatic process and consequently invalidating the diametric structure of the masculine/feminine split. (Kaneda 2017)

It should however be clear from all this that these ideas - which have allegiance to feminism and post-structural positions - clearly inform the works, but do not define them. In that they may inform the choices of working material, and approaches to using that material, but they do not necessarily circumscribe any global meaning. Again, being abstract paintings, they remain ultimately indeterminate, their temporary 'closure' being the intervention of the viewer. Kaneda herself saw the form itself as providing the equivalent of, 'metaphors, simile, and analogy' (Kaneda 1999:19). We might also think of Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's notion of 'a nonrepresentation that none-the-less represents'² – something that we find, again, in Adorno, but also, closer to Gilbert-Rolfe's ideas, in Deleuzian notions of form's forces,

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² See Jeremy Gilbert Rolfe's *Beyond Piety: Critical Essays on the Visual Arts 1986-93*, Cambridge 1995

affects and their inherent virtualities that connect to things. Painting becomes, to use Deleuze and Guattari's enigmatic term, an 'abstract machine', a circuitry of such affects and virtualities; all the more so, it could be added, in work that becomes complex. That the 'progressive' history of abstraction has traditionally been one of emptying out, with modernist abstraction becoming synonymous with reduction, goes without saying now. Works like Kandinsky's in the 1920s, where elements allow for an intricacy and interaction and which are difficult to 'take in all at once', were often seen as anomalies. For Kaneda and many of her contemporaries coming to the fore in the 1990s, abstraction could be 're-viewed' from this perspective of complexity.

It was the British philosophical aesthete Harold Osborne, drawing on information theory, who attempted to see abstraction in terms of semantic (referencing the external world in some way) or syntactic (formal structuring and interacting components) oppositions. These days such conceptual mappings are more likely to be folded onto one another as they are by no means mutually exclusive. The work becomes, as Kaneda suggested above, an amalgam of drives, intentions, allusions, memories, desires and discoveries. In itself a field of differences, and yet not simply or clearly retrievable via language as such. They take form, literally, in the work itself - becoming diffuse and permeable. It is what Julia Kristeva has called 'an Instinctual economy', 'heterogeneous to meaning' with its 'subject-in-process' (Kristeva: 1980 p. 146). Kaneda has stated something of this in an interview where she suggested, 'what I want to imagine is a state before the symbolic.' (Kaneda 1998) That is, a world before we enter into language, where sensation and bodily excitations or pulsations dominate, and the body, undifferentiated as a subject, is open to these excitations/sensations. Such a space cannot be adequately described as such in language, but we can imagine an access to something like it, where everyday logics and meanings no longer function and the seemingly defined 'centred' subject unravels. Such an unravelling creates a situation where unbridled perception is highlighted over any pragmatic naming or communication. This is closely bound up with aesthetic sensation and pleasure at its most intense: the *jouissance* of Lacan and Kristeva. What remains important in Kristeva's early work is the tension between the resources of the symbolic and the pressure of the unconscious drives, a tension that inscribes and figures work, the labour of the body itself. This is relevant to Kaneda's approach, and while not a gestural painter in the conventional sense, her work posits a direct address to the body and an invitation to reciprocally navigate the 'body' of the painting and the sensations that arise from the juxtaposition and interpenetration of form.



Figure 6: *Disciplined Panic*, 2013, acrylic on linen, 64 x 54 inches, courtesy of the artist

A painting is a bounded field, where things materialize and co-exist but also a relational field of subjectivity, appearance and contingency. Sensation, the affect brought about by elements and their combination, together with contrasting visual identities remain at the core of Kaneda's practice. *Disciplined Panic* (2013) is an interesting formal precursor to the more recent paintings and in this sense looks both backwards to the previous sets of work and forwards to the next. It encapsulates that particular series of paintings' engagement with gesture. In the work from the '90s we find contrasting material procedures within the one work: brushed, poured, knifed, dripped, marbled. This materiality, non-declamatory as it was, gives way in the work of the later '90s and early 2000s, to a smooth meticulous finish, a painstaking rendition of surface. From 2011, a more direct exploration of gesture returns, albeit one step removed, and we experience a contrasting range of methods again: sharp painting, spray, blurs etc. As in this painting, gesture is a derived form – taken from Lichtenstein's Pop brushstroke which is in itself a critique of abstract expressionism by turning the 'site of authenticity' into a comic strip image. Kaneda takes this second degree image and further dissects it, whereby its sign value is no longer simply a play on subverting the connotation of an original referent but a dispersion, and simultaneously an animating articulation across a surface, in effect reusing it expressively. These quasi-brushstrokes (which are simply shapes derived from an abstraction of a brushstroke and therefore not situated as the event/trace of an actual one) have culturally specific connotations of Manga or Japanese prints. It helps create the non-perspectival, flat latticed space, one that we have seen in the earlier paintings, although in the present series it creates shattered surface condition. These gestural inferences, though, cannot be anchored; they are, in fact 'deterritorialized', adrift from their possible origins. Elsewhere I have made some connections with Kaneda's pieces and the experience of cinema, attempting to think out of Deleuze's writing on cinema, especially his notion of the time-image³. Clare Colebrook admirably sums up this complexity as follows: 'In the time-image we do not see time as a logical connection or progression but as interval, disruption or difference; cinema [at its most effective or cinematic - DR] presents the way things do *not* hang together through images in states of variation without organizing observers or subjects.' (Colebrook: 2002 p.58) This might also be a compelling description of this painting, with its almost impossible space as contradictory as an Escher work. Its laminated space consists of a succession of spatial gaps, cut into, 'ungrounded' and dislodged. This particular series - shown at Galerie Richard in [New York City, 2014](#) – is intense in its extremities of motifs, its articulation of distorted surfaces; the variation and collection of elements viewed from one piece to another has a violence, almost. Within these works this can range from gestural articulations, diffuse blended spaces associated with advertising, to the light grey checkerboard grid derived from the unprintable default layer in Photoshop. This latter is therefore, essentially, a pictorial *non-space*, perhaps a visual hint that the elements themselves are not carriers of meaning in a direct symbolic sense. Kaneda started using the computer in the early 2000s as a means of assembling material and drafting paintings, although the work had always had something of a technological feel in some ways. *Disciplined Panic* and the paintings that surround it up to about 2015 are the culmination of an exploration of such mechanical/digital processes that can inform painting. Each painting, however, remains defiantly hand-made and it is this strange translation method from the

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³ See Ryan, D., Introduction, *Talking Painting* (2002)

digital to hand rendering that creates an unsettled arena for the eye and body. Scale, due to digital origins and 'scaling up', becomes disembodied, and the reciprocal viewing body, likewise, becomes dispersed perceptually. This work (and its companions in the series) gives us a painterly sense of this 'time-image', correlating with G. Roger Denson comments in reviewing the exhibition: "In effect, Kaneda is conducting a dialogue between the mechanical and the manual, the formulaic and the improvisational, the historical and the contemporary." (Denson:2014). A key here is also the fact that within such a field of assemblies no one term is really privileged – so we can't really see Kaneda as neo-pop, appropriational, conceptual or whatever. Because she demands an *encounter* with the total field itself. This may well align itself with the residues of existential thinking within abstract expressionism that demands a 'renewal' of the viewer in the act of looking, but from a very different positioning.

'Painting,' Joseph Marioni once said, 'is by its nature an experiential place of solitude.' (Nasgaard 2001:24) Of course, such a place could also be dismissed as luxury or privilege, hence the drive to find value in the collective. But, writing in 2021, we have had, albeit enforced, a collective sense of solitude (and vice versa maybe) that allows us to rethink this solo dialogue that painting can stimulate. Such a notion might well go against recent practices that highlights value in the collective, circulatory or contextual positioning of a work, such as brought to light by David Joselit's notion of 'transitive painting'⁴. But, thinking about how these paintings attend to the viewer, if we can put it like that, and their qualities as deconstructive paintings, it's pretty much clear that they require this intense one-to-one relationship. Interestingly, Kaneda's experiments with particular spatial articulations of the paintings in their installation (other than a 'traditional' hang), or in the late 90s, with doubled paintings of different sizes, were actually fairly short lived. I think this is because the 'bounded' painting gives a focus for the viewer (or at least the positioning from which they can be de-focussed). We could even see this bounded, delimited support as, by analogy, similar to Kristeva's discussion of the *thetic*⁵; that structuring that enables things to be seen, proposed, 'the threshold of language.' (Kristeva 1984 p:45) Painting's complexity - and perhaps abstract painting especially - is such that this reciprocity between the viewing subject and depiction/denotation is displaced and disturbed, but not completely abandoned (perhaps perspectival figurative painting might provide something akin to this semantic structuring, up to a point, but only when at its most conventionalised - guaranteeing signification and recognition). The canvas or support remains an important sensory cueing device in this respect. Within Kaneda's work, this setting up of the viewing subject as situated, though not controlled or 'organized', intensifies this relationship between expectation, meaning and indeterminacy. If the inherited language of abstraction is inherently patriarchal, then the deconstructive processes that examine, 'mime' or destabilize them must still inhabit that 'linguistic' conduit whilst essentially refiguring it. But

⁴ See David Joselit's *Painting Besides Itself* (2009) and *Reassembling Painting* (2015)

⁵ The *thetic* can be seen as allowing a linguistic 'thesis' to be put forth, rationally situating the subject within the world via logic, judgement, linguistic system; it is derived from the Greek "such as is placed", laying down or setting forth. It is the frame to make a coherent linguistic proposition, rational and syntactic. Kristeva refers to a 'thetic phase' of development, after the 'unification' of the conscious subject in the mirror phase and the entrance into the symbolic. Ultimately, Kristeva suggests a subject that is fluid, processual and conflicted because of the constant negotiation with the pre-symbolic, which we might call non-thetic. See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984)

this is not a po-faced academic exercise – on the contrary Kaneda’s work is full of play, an unabashed exploration of pleasure at the level of making and assembling, and expression, which requires this traditional one-to-one encounter that certain paintings desire and create.



Figure 7: *Consistent Volatility* 2020, 72 x 63 inches, acrylic on canvas, courtesy of the artist

As mentioned earlier, different series in Kaneda’s work deal with quite different elements or approaches to form. Looking at the more recent pieces, produced since the residency at the American Academy in Rome with which I opened, there are strong connections to some of the concerns of the very early work from 1990, discussed earlier. In contrast to the previous ‘gestural’ series, these works have jettisoned the turbulent overlaid fields of that set, and also they consciously avoid a pre-painting digital mapping to develop the formal relationships. She has said of these new works:

I wanted to make paintings that used bolder forms but still create a situation in which the principles I embraced were still in operation. I also wanted the different sections or elements while they appeared to complement each other, still retained its specific identity. So if you focused on one area, that area would appear to have its own intrinsic logic, but still depend on other areas for a synthesis that was still illogical. (Kaneda 2018)

These changes also probably reflect the influence of Rome, and Kaneda has mentioned in particular the influence of Roman mosaics and the kind of frontality of space often depicted in such decorative fragments. Within the recent paintings the form is more settled, direct, monumental in some ways, but always mirrored or doubled. This doubling has a relationship with patterning and formal decorative schemes in general (such as found in such mosaics or textiles) but also a mirroring, internally, of the one-to-one viewing situation. This can be seen in *Consistent Volatility* (2020) which uses a repetition of ovals and fragmentary fields of stripes to form the two columns, which crop up in other recent paintings. This ‘facing’ quality accentuates the kind of independent identities of demarcated areas while also cementing the impression of cohesiveness. Constantly echoing themselves internally, these works suggest much more of a unity than previously, the symmetry being an anti-compositional device known from minimalism. This cohesion becomes an illusory quality, yet the undermining of unity happens at a much slower pace in these works. But If these forms operate as mirrors within the space, then they are also distorting ones; Kaneda

has often distorted and warped geometrical form to arrive at motifs, but also positioned the way colour operates in relation to these forms in surprising ways. In the slightly earlier *Halcyon Distress* (2018), as in most of these recent works, the whole surface consists, again, of this doubled reflection of form and the whole effect is one of a kaleidoscopic image; the colour, in this instance should, conventionally, reflect the solidity of the demarcated form and yet, as in the previous painting, it takes on a refracted, prismatic-like property due to the gradated blending of horizontal bands that appears to cut across the form. In this way, for all the boldness of the form itself, the paintings retain a fugitive, indeterminate attribute that very subtly undermines the sense of broad, delineated closed form. Such visual games area also have musical connotations, in their search for inversion, repetition, infiltration of difference and echo.

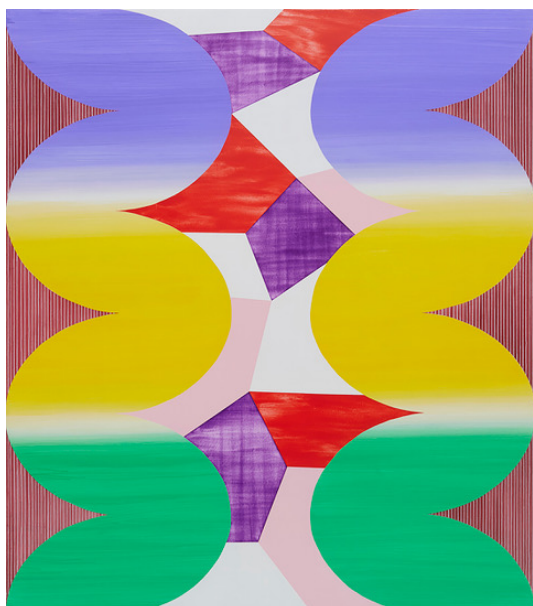


Figure 8: *Halcyon Distress* 2018, 72 x 63 inches, acrylic on canvas, courtesy of the artist

To consider formal geometric or gestural figures as visual propositions with their formal doubling, and the possibility of each being refracted through the other, is to explore an ever evolving notion of difference, and turning binary oppositions within the material inside out. I see something of this as a continuity of Kaneda's overall output, where dualities of form are broken down, and intensities of colour operate obliquely to their formal containment.

Kaneda's recent paintings propose another chapter in her approach to abstraction, its histories and current possibilities, together with thoughts on what painting can actually accomplish now. Her questions have remained fairly constant throughout her career,

concerned with how abstraction might reformulate its lexicon, rules and criteria; how can pleasure inform critique (a continuing classical conundrum)? How can theory inform a practice without enforcing its meaning? What contemporary resources can refresh the approach to making? To these we can add issues around the bounded and unbounded characteristics that infuse how we might approach painting, as makers and viewers – the space of the encounter. To go beyond simply being a sign of itself, abstraction needs to remain alert to the active processes of *forming*, and all its connotations; here, Shirley Kaneda's work offers its own clear guide.

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