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## An Evolution of the Mind

Milton Fletcher



Millar Kelley, Blue. 26" x 24" Photos and permission Millar Kelley.

Six paintings by Millar Kelley are featured in the "EXPANSE" show at Studio 12N in Manhattan's Garment District. Most of the works feature distinctive visual geometric shapes such as ovals or rectangles—favored motifs of Kelley's. She uses them to imply qualities of personality and behavior in otherwise abstract settings. On the whole, these new pieces are an experimental and exploratory response to her previous set of non-representational paintings, "The Floating World" series. In those works the artist developed a self-contained structure that she is now trying to modify and expand from. Kelley is intrigued

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by extremes; "I am always in flux between ambiguity and definition, chaos and order, representation and abstraction."

As Kelley addresses these seeming paradoxes, she presses forward with a collection of pieces that vividly display her existing and changing aesthetics. There are repeating visual figures and unconventional color schemes, rough textures and built up layers of paint. In terms of intellectual effect, these works edge towards metaphor and symbolism.

Three of Kelley's pieces are of particular note because together they concisely show the journey she has undertaken. The layered paint and colliding geometric shapes of *Windy* have a very frenetic feel. There is interplay between light yellow and orange and the darker browns and blues. The different-sized rectangular shapes create a sense of energy and kineticism that suggest a friction between these figures. Could they be a metaphor for the frantic pace of contemporary human life?

There is also texture. Kelley added marble dust to the dark brown pigments to create matte, gritty, brick-like visual symbols. When viewing the painting from the side, all the other colors fall away and what is left are the dark, monolithic bricks dominating and anchoring the top of the canvas with an unexpected feeling of stillness. It has the perverse effect of both weightlessness and weight fullness coupled with a rough coarseness that one doesn't usually associate with free-floating objects.

In contrast, *Olive and Gold's* heaviness is front and center. The piece's background is informed by

Fauvists-like colors: bright and iridescent. To counterbalance this, Kelley adds a large medium gray and dark green oval-shaped object in the foreground. The effect is not unlike plopping a large blotted boulder in front of sunny landscape-like palette. Kelley seems to be searching for a new selection of colors for her work that combines the schemes of some of the artists she admires (Pierre Bonnard and Henri Matisse) while reacting against them. It is a highly formalist's approach to painting that reads like a dialogue between opposites or Kelley playing the Devil's advocate against previously favored colors. Additionally, she continues exploring different styles of painting mediums, brushstrokes and textures in the quest for a refined visual vocabulary that keeps pace with her evolving content.

With its receding color scheme of various shades of blues, browns and dark green, *Blue* has a foreboding mood to it. In the painting's busy background are various crude and primitive shapes: squiggles, hatchings, dabs and curves. Again Kelley is using various types of markings and figures to create a combination of textures. The oval motif is also there—it's the largest shape in the piece. But unlike the bulky oval of *Olive and Gold*, *Blue's* is presented in outline form. With its bright blue tint and prominence in the foreground, this oval hovers like a benign talisman above the chaos of dark forms and textures that clash in the painting's background. It is ironic that a painting with such ominous overtones can also convey a sense of transcendence.

What these three works illustrate is the continuity and contrast common to all the pieces in the show:

repeating visual motifs, striking color schemes that are unique to each individual painting and the artist's honest desire for innovation and a unique aesthetic harmony. In short, we are witnessing an artist's creative evolution.

The "EXPANSE" exhibit is curated by Alexandra Rutsch at Studio 12N.