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Judy Ledgerwood at Tracy Williams

I was once introduced to a choreographer at a party. In the course of the conversation I asked her who her influences were. She loftily answered, “Well, George Balanchine,” seeming to indicate that no one else but the Master was worth bothering with. Similarly, “Hard Jam,” Judy Ledgerwood’s most recent exhibition at Tracy Williams, Acknowledged another master, Henri Matisse, with blithe confidence and exquisite poise.



View of Judy Ledgerwood’s painting exhibition “Hard Jam,” 2007; at Tracy Williams.

Ledgerwood responds to the late Matisse of liturgical or deracinated Orientalist decoration with a limited vocabulary of diamond patterns and an insignia of four adjoining circles. These are combined in a number of rectangular paintings, which run from 5 to 6 feet in length or height. Here, loosely ornamental brushwork is executed with a degree of levity and calligraphic grace. In the smaller 15-inch-square canvases that punctuated the show, the four joined circles are painted as a lone shape, either as a solid or limned in outline. Their associations—sacral badge, tantric emblem, ghostly tattoo—switch from painting to painting. Ledgerwood paints with acrylic gouache, which gives her high-pitched color a rich, dry glow that she sometimes contrasts within a work by an application of glitter or a dab of shiny black paint.

Several canvases formed part of an electrifying installation that resembled a cross between a rave club and a Bloomsbury salon. On two walls in the front room of this townhouse gallery, Ledgerwood loosely brushed wide vertical bands of tempera in gold, bright orange, chocolate, turquoise and a diamond pattern of gold over lime. One of the smaller squares, a Day-Glo red and turquoise canvas, hung above the room’s fireplace, where it resembled a decorative tile. On another wall, she introduced a floral motif around the doorway and on the adjacent wall painted a solid lilac background for *Giotto’s Joy*, a canvas with a midnight-blue field covered in bright gold gestural strokes like four-leaf clovers. It evoked a priest’s embroidered robe.

In another room, *Grandma’s Flower Garden*, at 84 by 120 inches the largest painting in the show, varied the circle motif within individual units of a multicolored diamond pattern. Ledgerwood accentuated the quiltlike aspect of the painting by bringing the painted field in from the edges so the overall image was suspended like a piece of cloth on the white canvas. This risked being corny, sentimental, high-strung and steely, all at the same time, as did the entire exhibition. In the end, “Hard Jam” was an elegant tour-de-force, a performance that demonstrated how much freedom, retinal and physical, can still be derived from a powerful canonical influence.

--Joe Fyfe