

JUDY LEDGERWOOD *April Showers*

TRACY WILLIAMS | MAY 6 – JULY 1, 2011

JOHN YAU

There are two parts to this exhibition. In the main gallery space Judy Ledgerwood has hung eight paintings, all 60" x 60", while in the north gallery she has completed a painting in tempera on three walls. In front of the tempera "Chromatic Patterns for New York I," which stretches across adjacent walls, the artist has placed painted ceramic vases that she made in collaboration with Nancy Gardner. While the eight square paintings share the same motif—a quatrefoil made of four circular forms pressed together, leaving an open space in the center—each painting's overall form, palette, and surface is distinct.

Much has been written about the quatrefoil's resemblance to a flower or a mandala, and about the artist's evocation of carpets and women's work, but those are not the reason why these paintings held my attention. When I was looking at the painting "Spiritualized" (2011), which is brown-violet, magenta, and gold, I was initially reminded of a lavish, oversized box of Godiva chocolates and of church vestments, before other associations began to surface, mostly having to do with the erotic. Such links are as abundant as these paintings are optically and viscerally sumptuous. A carefully considered synthesis of opulence and structure, excess and restraint, is at the heart of Ledgerwood's work as well as a starting point for speculation.

If we consider the iconic floral images in American art, we are likely to include the flower paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe and the silkscreen flowers of Andy Warhol. Along with the numerous art historical reasons explaining why these works are central to American art, there is another reason that is seldom mentioned, and it has to do with the collective American psyche. Both O'Keeffe and Warhol abhorred flesh because of its susceptibility to time, and their images of flowers embody a thorough denial of the physical body and of time passing. This abhorrence is in tune with capitalism's program to convince the consumer that, for enough money, time can be shaped and even slowed down.

Ledgerwood's paintings go in the opposite direction—they celebrate flesh and fleshiness. They abound with sexual appetite and fecundity—the show is titled *April Showers* after all—playing out the dance between unbridled desire and polite conduct. Or, to put it another way, O'Keeffe and Warhol's flowers are Apollonian, while Ledgerwood's are Dionysian, pushing back against restraint. With their rivulets of paint cascading down the surface, the works in *April Showers* occupy an area of the garden that is home to the dripping blossoms of Cy Twombly and the equally juicy, tropically colored intertwinings of Norman Bluhm.

The paintings contain three elements and are usually comprised of four colors. On each painting's white square Ledgerwood paints a smaller monochromatic square—think sheet pinned to a wall. Its edges are not straight, with paint dripping down from the bottom, an effect that, as other observers have noted, evokes carpet fringe. Within the square the artist paints four abutting circles that leave an open central area where the monochromatic ground is often visible. Within this area the artist paints another element with rounded edges. Other than the square format there are no straight lines. Each element is monochromatic, and the surfaces are palpable. The play between the painting's opticality and physicality serves to remind us that although hand and head can be far apart, they are not disconnected.



Judy Ledgerwood, "Lolita," 2011. Oil and raw pigments on canvas. 60 x 60". Courtesy of the artist and Tracy Williams, Ltd., New York

The possibility that paradise is attainable is central to these paintings. While many observers have advanced the view that Ledgerwood's paintings proceed from a feminist outlook, I want to put forth another possibility—that the strength of these paintings is the result of their anarchic impulse, which the artist connects to sexual desire and sensuality. In "Lolita" (2011), the artist has painted four pale pinkish circles (or petals) on a slightly darker fleshy-pink ground. In the center area that is formed by the cluster of circles the artist paints a round fluorescent red circle, with rivulets of color streaming down the surface. "Lolita" is flagrant, sexy, lewd and comical, but that's not all.

For one thing, given the painting's title, we have to ask, Who is looking at the painting? Have we become the possessive, deceitful Humbert Humbert looking at Lolita, or are we Lolita, who is obsessed with pop culture, looking in the mirror? Or are we incriminated simply as art lovers looking at an abstract painting? We are implicated by the pleasure principle, and have to address our relationship to the reality principle (as defined by Freud). Are we driven by a desire for pleasure and a deep-seated need to avoid pain? Or have we learned to defer pleasure when reality demands it? The paintings open up a space for reflection. The decorative has been transformed into something altogether unexpected—a place in which we see ourselves looking at a world brimming with an optical sensuality. We can look at Ledgerwood's paintings, even surreptitiously touch them, and wish to possess them, but, spatially speaking, we cannot occupy them. The dripping fluorescent red in "Lolita" is so much wounded lipstick.

Is looking a violation? Godiva, we might remember, is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *godgifu*, which means gift of God. The one man who did look at Lady Godiva as she rode through the streets naked was the tailor, who was struck blind and known forever after as "Peeping Tom." Ledgerwood's paintings touch upon all these ways of looking without ever becoming moralistic. Pleasure is complicated and the history of our pursuit of it (both individually and collectively)—guaranteed by the Constitution—does not speak well of us. ☞