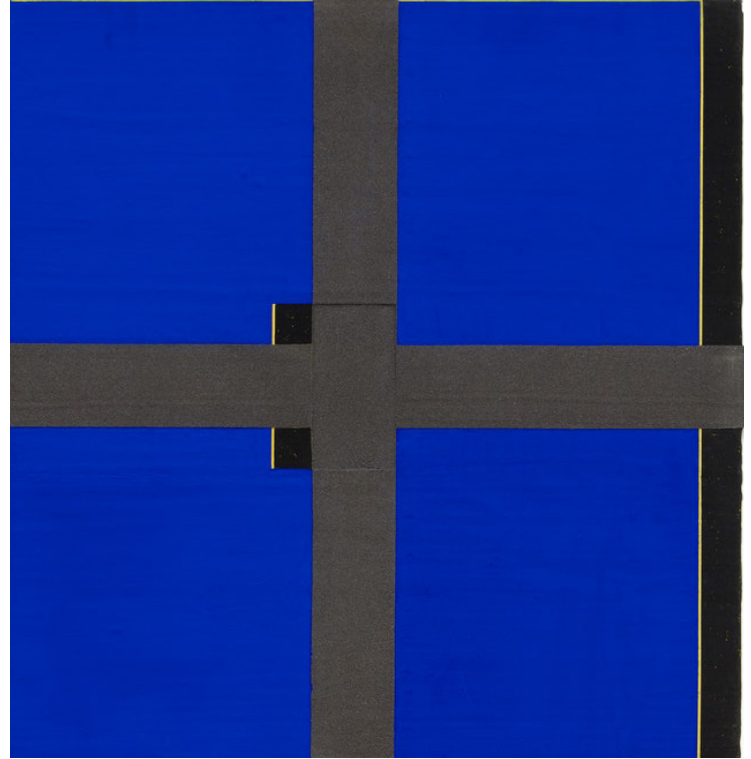


The Phoenix and the Mountain: In-Centric Abstraction in the '80s

By Charles Schultz | June 2021



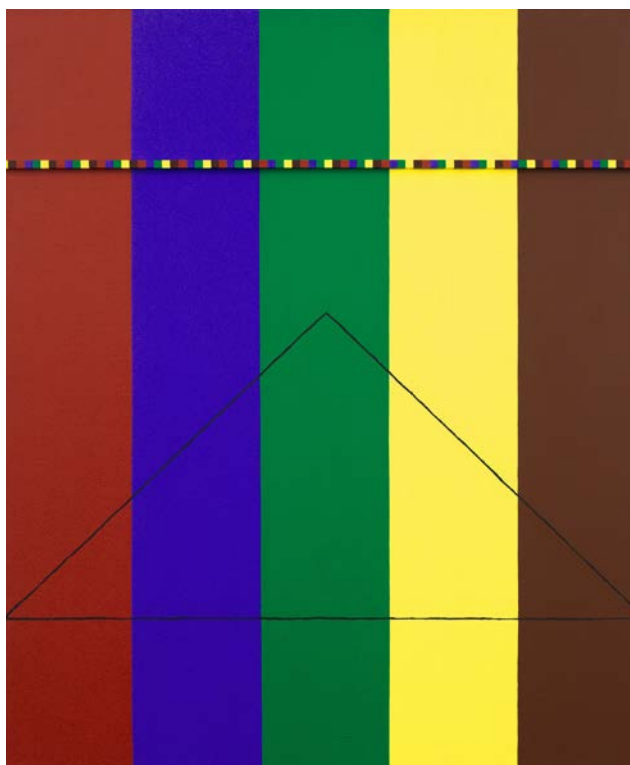
Chris Martin, *Temple*, 1985. Oil on canvas, 16 x 14 inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York.



Harvey Quaytman, *Hotel Regina Revisited, II*, 1986. Acrylic and iron on canvas, 28 1/2 x 28 1/2 inches. Courtesy the Harvey Quaytman Trust and Van Doren Waxter, New York.

In the early 1980s the artist Regina Bogat faced forbidding crossroads. Her beloved husband, the artist Al Jensen, was sick; she knew death was near. Jensen was over two decades her senior, and Bogat recognized the life and family she'd built with him would have to change. When she told the story to Veronica Roberts in 2015 she described the looming rupture and necessary recalibration of her identity as infused with trepidation and hope. She was on the threshold of a journey, and out of that moment there emerged a series of paintings called "The Phoenix and the Mountain," which serves as the keystone to a wonderful group exhibition organized by Choghakate Kazarian.

The show includes seven artists and draws a tight focus on a particular line of painting from the '80s that can be characterized by the artists' use of geometric forms to generate or suggest narrative. Bogat's work is the most explicit in this regard; the phoenix is a representation of herself and the mountain her imagined destination. Chris Martin, who knew and admired Jensen's work, is part of the group. Kazarian selected one of his small, iconic pieces, *Temple* (1985), that communicates a feverish, unfussy approach to a place where one might settle into a determined stillness. Martin's temple is solid. The paint has been built up and scraped down, leaving a sense of steadiness and firmness to the hard-edge forms of his well-defined shapes. The vertical columns of *Temple* visually rhyme with the upright bands of golden bars in Jonathan Lasker's painting from 1984, *Deep Purple*. Both artists want you to see their brushwork, to feel their painterly touch, but not at the expense of their chosen subject. This was obvious enough for Martin's work, but I read Lasker's composition a bit more loosely, not through symbolic



Regina Bogat, *The Phoenix and the Mountain #9*, 1980. Acrylic, wood, rope on canvas, 50 x 40 inches. Courtesy of Zürcher Gallery, NY / Paris.

references, but in terms of the relationship between the set of forms that make up his composition. To this end, the piece puts into play an interesting idea: how one is transformed in subtle or dramatic ways when entering or departing a place, or perhaps a group.

I carried this idea with me when I stood before Harvey Quaytman's *Hotel Regina Revisited, II* (1986). Where is this place? The title suggests a story, but the work offers no explicit narrative. The surface textures of Quaytman's paintings are astounding and his sense of color in the dark ranges is poignant and stirring. Here one looks upon a field of acrylic blue quadrants set apart by strips of iron. The arrangement is simple enough to allow the material qualities of the work to be felt without much interference. Reaching further in the direction of material agency, Emery Blagdon's *Element 08 and Element 07* (both ca. 1954–86) are comprised of copper wire and wood. Both works are the size of small plates; the wood is roughly hewn, and the wire is worked by hand into a coil or a spiral shape. Faint pencil lines drawn at right angles across the surface of the wood are marked at regular intervals with tiny indentations like the artist practiced a kind of acupuncture on the objects. They seem built for a purpose other than aesthetic appreciation.

Two artists placed adjacent to one another in the show are Thomas Nozkowski and Lisa Beck. It's an interesting choice because they accentuate one another's different approaches rather well. Here Kazarian abuts a large, ethereal painting of spheres by Beck with tight little works on board by Nozkowski. Hers is a vision of the cosmos on a macro scale; his could be the same on a micro scale. Beck's *Eclipse* (1988) and *Around the Day in 80 Worlds* (1988) have the archetypal feel of something built on known patterns and cycles, of something seen from great heights, whereas Nozkowski's two untitled works are the inverse: I don't recognize any predetermined coordination, nor any grandiosity of vision. They feel like the exercises of an artist whose intention is to discover through a kind of observational sensitivity that approaches the monastic. They make you want to take a walk and just look, as closely as you can.

As I circumnavigated the gallery I stopped at last before Regina Bogat's *Solola* from 1986. A wooden box with a hinged lid, the top is white and the bottom black. There is a Mayan-style handprint painted on either side and as I stood wondering about the interior, it was opened for me. Inside there was a map. Bogat made these boxes as reliquaries after her husband died, for objects too laden with meaning for disposal. The map papered the inside walls of the box which was otherwise empty. I thought about this map on the inside, about where artists find direction, about how their journeys are recorded and what is left behind. Mostly, I thought about who we choose to carry with us into the future, and who may choose to carry us.



Regina Bogat, *Solola*, 1986. Acrylic, wood, paper, wooden box with hinged lid 4 x 13 x 11 inches. Courtesy Zürcher Gallery, NY / Paris.