

TUSSLE

JUDY LEDGERWOOD, *Sunny Redux* Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

By Pia Singh
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JUDY LEDGERWOOD, *Jaywalking*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 84 x 92 inches

A little over a year since ‘Sunny’ opened at Denny Gallery, New York, Rhona Hoffman presents an exquisite selection of Judy Ledgerwood’s large-scale paintings in Sunny Redux. It’s hard to write about Ledgerwood’s works in relationship to one another without getting caught up in formalist underpinnings of abstraction, interpretative language, or trying too hard to set out to contextualize the artists’ engrossment with color, form, and pattern. Initially, it was the intensity of play, how Ledgerwood teases both theory and history through the pleasurable (dare we say beautiful) translation of form and color, that felt like one possible route to entering the show. Yet, it felt like a disservice to the demand of the work, specifically at this time.

How does one write about the rebellion of abstraction at a time of war? What bearings does language have on policy, and in turn, how does “art-speak” afford a degree of political impunity, dissuading both reader and writer from identifying the marks of imperial violence on our perception? Between the undeniable espousal of practice (as politic) and theory (of art), and

accelerated consumption of images in mediated realities, what is revolutionary about the condition of slow-looking that a Ledgerwood demands?

Returning to the urgency of painting, Ledgerwood intoxicates her viewers with intense full-throttle primaries. 'Sunny', from the title of both exhibitions, is "seeking brightness through the bleak, investigating how we bond through common experiences." according to the artist. Discovering the specificities of her palette and 'brightness' we are pointed to in Platonic primaries of black, white, red, and what was once described as 'bright' - a color that "breaks the sequence, may perhaps not be so much an intruder as a disguised yellow," the remaining hues of Ledgerwoods palette function as ciphers. Poking at the orthodoxies of architectural modernism and the likes of Bauhaus and Corbusier, Ledgerwood places the high art of the West cheek-by-jowl with the lowly, kitsch of the East, articulating her colossal appetite for challenging historical narratives. Wrestling the domination of masculinity over the sensuality of voluminous brightnesses, Ledgerwood manages to somehow resolve the untameable intimacy between *disegno* and *colore*.

To be compelled toward vivid color with such undeniable force is one thing, to be of color in this act is an entirely different question. Constantly posited as the Other, be it through the skin or cultural custom, David Batchelor writes of how color and the Other have always been perceived as equally dangerous things in his book, *Chromophobia*. There were moments of feverish looking through Ledgerwood's motley cast that stun the viewer to consciousness. Magnificent dark Prussian blues, Robin blue or Firozi, a stand-alone Crimson, Pyrrole Orange, and Cadmium yellow oils seduce oil-slick black, tainted, and titanium whites, reminding that there can be neutrality nor equipoise in times of chaos. In a richly painted suite of five paintings from 2022, an ensemble of material, planar, and rhythmic values reckon with chromatic re-evaluation. The autonomy of unbounded primaries in a story about the intimacy of paint demands closer listening.

Ledgerwood wields color unhesitatingly, in spaces that are measured in electromagnetic waves. The viewer's body experiences her colors well before intellect kicks in, foregrounding a sensual experience of color inhabited within the body. The artist speaks about valuing color interaction more than any direct interpretation or meaning of singular color. "Painting has a lot to contend with now with the seduction of screens. Cast colors unfold in their own time... light bounces off the surfaces and fills surrounding space. Color can become atmospheric in this way, enveloping the viewer in space so they each can unfold in their own time." The unfolding and enfolding of color and shape, movement from background to foreground, and code-switching between outline and body reveal how Ledgerwood has no interest in hierarchical order. Speaking on one of her earliest experiences with color, Ledgerwood shares, "I received a faculty grant at Northwestern University to visit India to study the festival of color, *holi*, back in 2012. We visited Mathura and it was an absolute chaos of color... People covered in random swathes of color, head to toe! Yet they were completely recognizable as human beings. The only symmetry to their bodies was based on the silhouette. In that instance, I saw polychrome as a social leveler of sorts." In a riot of color, Ledgerwood eliminates a third dimension of the figure in pictorial

space, empowering the sensual discernment of the body over its subjectivity in the real world. Through line and motif, she alludes to the influences of the Pattern and Decoration movement of the Seventies alongside the Feminist and Post-Modernist movements of the Eighties. The full-frontal openness of O’Keefe’s florals, and the transgressive defiance of Lozano can be seen in the restructuring of rounded bodies, as expressive values of height, weight, two-dimensional depth, and three-dimensional movement across and around her canvases, emphasize her stamina for solidarity building over the muscle of modernity.

Each painting in *Sunny Redux* shares a contour of exposed white canvas at its uppermost edge. Insinuating the “hang of a painting” or drape as one would anticipate in textile, Ledgerwood speaks of her frustration with the conflict between painting and architecture, “*After Cold Days* (1999) at the Renaissance Society, I started to think about how the shape of a painting could be separated from the architecture of the gallery. To be in it or on top of it, pinned like a tapestry. This shifted the work into the pictorial” she explains, standing before *Footsteps*. Pointing to its upper quadrant, “I like this in-betweenness. It’s not truly abstract or representational in any way, and not truly pictorial either. It’s the shape of a painting.” Noticing motifs wrap around the edges of the canvas, some swell to the surface in thick impasto, others fill directly from her tube, it grows unclear if the pictorial plane is meant to be viewed in perspective or designed to be met head-on.



JUDY LEDGERWOOD, *Footsteps*, 2022, Oil and metallic oil on canvas, 72 x 48 inches

A triumvirate of colors inhabit *Footsteps* (2022) and *Skylarking* (2022), hung across one another on the gallery floor. Colors shift, moving left to right and back again. In *Skylarking*, contaminated white quatrefoils weigh down vertically against 'brightness'. To their right, they turn into the body of the sun against cloudless skies. Moving further right and into darkness, the quatrefoil florals now take on the syrupy blackness of night. The same robin blue from the previous quadrant vibrates against black, as blue and black would at twilight or dawn. Ledgerwood transitions colors as though animated by nature, yet each color registers its artifice, chemically produced and in an entirely Post-Modern way for consumption, much like commercial textile or architecture. Each four-lobed petular form sits face-forward on a diagonal grid, painted aggressively larger than life. Unique but specific on their terms, their pistils form impasto bullseyes as tube-wrought black and white halves form a circle capped with crimson teats and tongues. The invagination of painting destroys any plain read of its surface, transitioning to the interiority of the surface and its maker. At a far-right edge, Ledgerwood's hand gives way to chunks of titanium white oil paint, skipping down the face of the painting. Decisively retaining areas of heaving white paint, the artist's hand is a priori, responding to the emergence of the process. All order and reason must obey, producing something incredibly disruptive and wickedly provocative. A déclassé gesture contaminates, pushing modernity to confront its failures. As an artist coming into her own in the early Eighties, she sits in the creative ferment of Kandinsky, Calder, and Mondrian, reclaiming what modernism had once criticized for "being too commercial and too decorative." Ledgerwood reclaims the autonomy and liveliness of color, allowing it to possess a life of its own.

The quatrefoils all together appear consistent, depending on one's viewing distance. As the viewer is lured in, what at first presents as a pattern grows disorderly. Each definitive form finds its place within a network of self-ordered chaos. In the work, *Saturday* (2022), a blanket of bright yellow loosely formed quatrefoils sit atop Firozi-blue. Each Pyrrole orange-red pistil pins the elements to one another. Ledgerwood deconstructs the language of painting in allowing her viewers' faculties to evolve. Thickly painted at the upper quadrant, the quatrefoils disintegrate. as the eye moves down. Ledgerwood leaves gestural markings of where color was meant to be, code-switching once more between consciousness and being. The topology of a grid that houses each form reveals her movement around the canvas, as strokes and outlines of a rotated grid fail to perform as background. They are powerful and can be perceived as positive or social spaces where dangerous intruders disguised in yellow form a wayward army. What is perceived as complete or incomplete is of lesser importance as material strategies stretch out on the surface. Questions of openness and closed-ness arise as there is technically no thinning out of either form nor content that composes what is perceived as a pattern. No pronounced stretching, no slacking of the hand. There is a gradual intensity and intermittency of the artist's brush, similar yet entirely different to perceivable strokes in a neighboring painting titled, *Sunday* (2022).

Visiting Morocco to study architecture, light, and pattern, Ledgerwood noticed the complex geometries of zellige tile in Moroccan architecture. “Whenever a repair was made, it would be done with what was at hand. At the palace cemetery tiled in blue-white-blue-white, there was an interruption. A green.. then a yellow tile. That’s because that’s what the craftsman had at the time.” Considering pattern as a powerful force, Ledgerwood rotates a line-drawn geometric web, skewed and stretched to form robust diamond-shaped enclosures for tinted white, blue, and black quatrefoils. Quatrefoils from *Skylarking* (2022) now submit to a more euphuistic arrangement against yellow. Expressed fragments of linear perspective composed of diagonal white, then blueish-green lines abruptly continue down in black, then back to blue-green. Her forms here bear tactile flexibility as paint strokes grow more porous. They squeeze and stretch otherwise erect circular forms into lengthened ellipses, the pressure of her hand now light perhaps more at ease. The toughness of the lines themselves act as symbols that contradict one another. Ledgerwood’s brush picks up washes of black oils to fill circles with sketched strokes. Outlining four black florals in tube-whites along the right corner edge, she adds a three-dimensional aspect to an otherwise textile surface, throwing forms and fractals to produce a sense of asymmetry. The artist’s planar strategies are afoot again— but what is planar and what is surface? The only consistency is a flatly applied yellow that allows her to factor in contingent irregularities. “The sun rises, the sun sets; we breathe in and breathe out, the heart beats - and then something changes. It’s this anomaly that makes life meaningful, that holds the experience together. Patterns can hold together and fall apart at the same time.”

Moving away from codes and principles, *Jaywalking* (2022) shatters all conventions. Measuring 84 x 96 inches, Ledgerwood splits and divides the plane of the painting into triangular fractals. The upper quadrant is composed of largely calligraphic lines as though painted in Sumi-e inks, outlines of halved quatrefoils against white oils. Posturing as caricatures of themselves, their pistils, now split, radiate reds of Adnan-esque suns setting or rising along a hypotenuse. Ledgerwood’s drips are consistently distracting, as they move the eye as soon as it grows acquainted with a boundary, plane, or surface. Vivid red spots transform the figuration of space on the plane of the canvas, as they misalign, stretch, mirror, and double-drip into the sanctity of blues painted to fill erect, upturned, and inverted triangles. A large swath to the center holds rotated, reclining, leaning, and resting dark blue, light blue, yellow, and white wedges, in a matrix of relations with their halved-component quatrefoils. White, halved quatrefoils outweigh yellow, dark, medium, and light blue counterparts as they form an amalgam weighing out the outlined quatrefoils overhead. Yellow and blue forms seem to hold the ocean and the shadow, as colors pool and spill from positive forms to positive backgrounds. Jaywalking surface grows to excess, embracing Bakhtin’s carnivalesque. Florals appear to be in a state of becoming or undoing, possessed and tempered as a segmented grid snag on each of its vertices, reading both as diamond-shaped and triangular. A heavy dark blue sail appears right off center, we’re ensnared in Ledgerwood’s kaleidoscopic experience where forms have taken on character, publicly mocking any authoritative narrative. Colloquial, carnivalesque, animated ellipses have gone rogue on the rotated grid throwing signs in all directions. Jaywalking becomes a hallmark in the evolution of the artist’s semiotics, further problematizing the intertextuality between painting and writing, form and language, of color and line.

At the far left edge, a dark blue quatrefoil is incredulously drawn and partly painted in loose markings or strokes. Its upper lobe is nearly filled, to the right and bottom, Ledgerwood's spontaneous color markings hold enough weight without overdoing line or color. The reddish-orange sun at its center is larger, more viscous, laughing with a mouth of blood. To the far right, a calligraphic outlined quatrefoil's perfect center drips halfway down the surface. This intentional withholding of completeness indicates a site pregnant with the potential for a revolution. As Ledgerwood prepares to join forces with GRAY Gallery, New York, she's aware of the power she harnesses in the field of contemporary abstraction. "I'm interested in not solving all the questions that come forth in painting. It's like killing a painting, by over-fining it. I try not to paint over all the things that make it lively. I don't want to paint over all my decisions." Falling out of language and into the enrapture of Ledgerwood, Sunny Redux is a refreshing reframe on the unexhausted fullness of abstraction coupled with the fundamental necessity of attentive, full-bodied witnessing at a time of political pathos and delusion.

All images courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery. Photographed by Tom Van Eynde.