

Judy Rifka: Post-pluralist

For decades now, the narrative of postmodernism has held the art world firmly in its grasp, and for good reason. The postmodern is not simply the “post” of the modern but of everything we know, or thought we knew, that is until the Romanticist worship of fracture, furthered by Modernist aims, was analyzed, ripped open, and finally deconstructed, only to be continually reborn under the guise of a few key artists in the late 60s and 70s. Their multi-disciplinary experiments in video, photography, performance, painting, and sculpture redefined what art could be, how it and life could co-habitate once again, how the two could move together, think, breathe the same air.

The term ‘postmodernism’ didn’t so much define a movement as a philosophical shift, an ethos of experimentation and exploration that was governed less by formalist sensibilities and academic jargon than it was the result of living in relation with others and communities. Taking cues from the everyday, its aim was to bridge the gap between art and life in an effort to experience the world close-up, in all of its immediacy. On a formal level this meant there were no longer any rules to adhere to, or that, at the very least, the rules that did remain were meant to be broken. Categorical distinctions between media were dissolved, as were the strictures of Abstract Expressionism, with their Kantian claims of disinterested contemplation. The work of Judy Rifka, which came to prominence during this clash of philosophical ideals, is, as a result, similarly difficult to classify. A figurehead in the downtown New York art scene since the early 70s, Rifka’s work has continuously tested the limits of art as we know it. From her more formal experimentations with movement and paint, as realized in her plywood paintings of the mid-70s, to her pop-figuration, photographic collages, and later animated videos, Rifka embodies the restless spirit of her era, that zeitgeist Baudelaire defined so eloquently as “the fugitive, the ephemeral,” in a word, “modernity.”ⁱ

It was this quest for the fugitive that compelled Rifka to break with her Abstract Expressionist roots and chart a new painterly territory all her own. As the artist herself attests, she was taught painting and drawing as an investigation of space and it is that terrain she has continually attempted to reinterpret and define. Her work from the 70s, much of which was collected by the Jean-Paul Najjar Foundation, was primarily concerned with solving the issue of Modernism. These simple paintings on plywood issued from a deep engagement with postmodernist approaches to dance and movement, as well as the artist’s longstanding interest in Constructivist ideas, particularly those put forth by Kasimir Malevich. The aim of these works, largely comprised of single, layered geometric shapes in a variety of monochromatic hues, was the cumulative building of form and material as a means of rendering a more accurate assessment of time and space. Built layer by layer, move by move, the paintings serve as a tangible manifestation of how we as bodies circumnavigate our surroundings.

“If you look closely at the plywood pieces,” Rifka states, “you will notice they are shapes built up from a series of knot-like trajectories crossing back and forth across each other in layers. The occasional use of two colors in these moves attests to this. The idea is a continuation of Malevich’s ideas about space...searching for hyperspace...but where I have taken this is an elimination of referential or emotionally conjured space by replacing the connections of one part to the suggested next with paint, with matter. Intentionality becomes a body, a body that designs itself.”ⁱⁱ

In her Untitled works from 1978, Rifka employs a crimson and ebony palette of acrylic against a ground of white painted wood. Each solitary shape, of which there are seven in the series, is the result of an accretion of movements and their associative painterly forms that, when viewed as a whole, lend unity to inchoate being. The works chart a temporal portrait of sorts, one that cannot be repeated but retain the potential for movement in their dichotomous splitting and overlapping brushstrokes, left visible within the differentiated fields of color. *Untitled (Number 3 of 7)*, for example, yawns for the right hand corner of the composition, its connected base fanning upwards in a similarly curving arc, while *Untitled (Number 2)* is comprised primarily of black tones that fold in on themselves, red bands of paint bisecting the shape as it curls protectively inward. In each painting, Rifka investigates the infinite possibilities of direction and accession, lending the forms an internal sense of logic that although born of chaos, culminate in a supremely rigorous formal geometry. Such succinct end goals are offset,

however, by the raw quality of the supports—plywood, either painted white or left natural in hue—which summon the LES counterculture Rifka was so invested in. In these material decisions we sense a collision between Modernist ideals and the reality of life in 70s era New York, a city agitated and in economic decline, with its allied music, emerging underground scene, and punk-defined grit.

That restless urbanity is conjured anew in Rifka's recent video created for the Najar exhibition, wherein the artist took the form of her 1978 *Number 3*, and set it, using puppet warp software, to a pulsing electronic score by DJ AL-x. In this playful riff on her earlier postmodernist experiments, Rifka animates the singular shape as it's stretched, caressed, and pried apart in real time. A balletic duet ensues between two dichotomous halves, at times frenzied, at others elegant, as the forms overlap one another in synchronous gyration. As the film reaches its climax, both movement and music become grander in scale, even sensual in their energy, an overlaid Bhangra beat from Hindustan emphasizing the rhythmic shift. The shape spirals in on itself, bending and flexing with each move of the cursor. Transfixed, we forget that we're viewing an animation and substitute sentient bodies in its stead.

This is a provocation, an evolution of the more formal earlier work, which Rifka describes as "painting the trajectory, form in time in paint." Having liberated the static image, the video allows the form to dance and interact in the same way that the artist's pioneering investigations into movement, painting, and dance resulted in a number of interdisciplinary performances and installations in the late 70s. Drawings, photo documentation, and correspondence between Rifka and Jean-Paul Najar from a number of these pieces are included in the exhibition, the first of which was staged at Franklin Furnace, Martha Wilson's eponymous space for avant-grade and performance art in 1978, where Rifka had Charles Moulton dance over a series of interwoven charcoal arrows drawn directly onto the floor. Later works staged in conjunction with the dance troupe The Black Hole at John Weber Gallery and at Hallwalls in Buffalo, NY, also utilized the arrow motif. These performative drawings were, according to Rifka, "a direct extension of what the body was doing" while the connective thread between the three mediums remained "the idea of the line as a trajectory in motion."ⁱⁱⁱ

The Photostat works, many of which the Najar Foundation collected, were the formal result of these investigations. Processed off of blackboard drawings Rifka made with chalk as she moved in her studio, these black and white images offer direct insight into the artist's working process, a method of problem solving that evokes the process-based explorations of other contemporaries, among them Barry Le Va and Yvonne Rainer. The results are both formal and whimsical, carrying with them the narrative of Modernism minus, in their rapidity of line and witty playfulness, the dogmatic heft of history. In each of these drawings, many of which feature conical shaped forms that cavort in the illusion of 3-dimension depth, Rifka's flirts with individual presence, tearing down the walls of impersonal abstract enclosure while mining and rewriting its very symbolism.

The linear connection between points, a theme the artist returns to in her more recent black canvases, mirrors the mind's propensity for filling in gaps, the rapid-fire synaptic connecting of events and past histories one must (at times unwittingly) subject themselves to in order to navigate the relentless stimulus of urban and technological overload. In these vibrant explorations (occasionally bordering on excess), silver swirls of paint join a multicolored array of circular orbs: fuchsia, neon green, cerulean blue. Like Rifka's animated sequences, the abstractions partake in a cosmic dance that defies gravity, space, and time. Whether or not these cognitive networks are an accurate reflection of the real isn't at issue; rather, it is the communicative gesture located between interstitial points that embodies the dynamism inherent to lived experience.

We are all pluralists by nature, struggling for identity against the forces of gentrification and homogeneity. Our path is one of process and discovery. Rifka's oeuvre, past and present, demonstrates that necessity. In the urgency of her forms and the speed of their transmission we encounter ourselves—the self of now and the self to come—pulsing, beating, evolving, "post." In other words, alive.

* Kara L. Rooney is a Brooklyn-based artist and critic working in performance, sculpture, and new media installation. She holds an MFA from the School of Visual Arts and is a Managing Art Editor for *The Brooklyn Rail*.

ⁱ In his essay, “The Painter of Modern Life,” Baudelaire defines modernity as “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.” (Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. Jonathan Mayne (Phaidon Press, 1863), 13).

ⁱⁱ Conversation with Judy Rifka, February 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Correspondence between Judy Rifka and author, June 2016.