



Stillness in Space

by Maxwell Heller

A central question guides artists working at Dieu Donn : What does papermaking offer that other creative forms cannot? Through collaborations in the Dieu Donn  workspace, Kate Shepherd had to tackle this issue perhaps more pointedly than most artists. The signature fine line in her paintings was a technical impossibility and her dedication to direct working practices necessitated that she cater to the characteristics of the pulp itself. In Shepherd's Dieu Donn  pieces, her versatility emerges as never before. Her creations synthesize seemingly opposing elements—the pulp's inherently organic texture, her pursuit of structure, the paper's textured surface and Shepherd's interest in illusory space.

A visit to Shepherd's Brooklyn studio offers insight into her current paintings, monumental enamel-painted wooden panels that reveal a delicate balance of contradictions. In some ways, the towering pieces intimidate the viewer, standing over seven feet tall and saturated with the austere, Post-Industrial colors unique to Shepherd's work. Their glaring surfaces evoke Gerhard Richter's *mirror paintings*, vibrating with activity, capturing movements in the room and appearing to shift as the viewer moves. They seem almost confrontational. Beyond this fluxuating activity, however, lies a space of total resolve. Shepherd tempers the effect of her monolithic panels with delicate, diagrammatic images that divide the painted plane. Cast like *nerves in patterns on a screen*, these networks recall the work of Agnes Martin—Shepherd's brush-strokes negotiate a path between mechanical precision and the organic wobble of human hands, celebrating both the ideal and the real, the Form and its manifestations. Her lines also revel in the illusion of depth, aligning to suggest spaces that lie just beyond the reflective panel; but by emphasizing simplicity in these diagrams, Shepherd limits the force of these illusions, inviting us to appreciate her images as marks on a flat plane as well as structures in space. Each image *winks* at the viewer,

pointing up its own artificiality, inviting us both to disbelieve and suspend disbelief as we peer through the windows of her work.

Just as Shepherd explores perception in her paintings, she continues this exploration in her work at Dieu Donn . As she puts it, she is interested in "how few lines can be used to create space," that is, how readily a viewer's mind agrees to perceive three dimensions on a flat surface. Realizing that her mathematical lines and polished surfaces could not be translated into paper compositions at Dieu Donn , she played instead with visual riddling and blocks of color. Shepherd completed an intellectual return to the central questions of her oeuvre, and the resulting pieces were made spontaneously without a pre-made template, thus allowing a more painterly approach. Because of this spontaneity, the group goes in disparate directions to explore the new medium's various strengths. While she started the residency by replicating the floor and wall compositions of her show at Galerie Lelong in 2003, she later worked to represent stacks of boxes and then returned to the vertical undulating lace work. The series loosely parallels the paintings on which she was working concurrent to the residency, but also reveals a more personal thought processes unique to her collaboration with Dieu Donn .

The early group of patterned pieces emphasizes interplay between positive and negative space rather than the interstitial line so present in her paintings. The pieces comprise conjoined diamonds arranged in harlequin/argyle grids that seem to undulate, as though projected on rippling curtains. At times, one net of quadrilaterals thrusts itself forward in the visual space, pushing the other set (of a contrasting or complementary color) back; but the sets often switch positions, upstaging one another by turn, or even snapping into the same plane. These active, almost aggressively colorful compositions read as weightier translations and a more candid approach to Shepherd's recent

explorations of lace; but where elegance and precision reign in her contemplative paintings, playfulness dominates here. Initially Shepherd began the patterned series with carefully placed plastic stencils, she quickly turned to more spontaneous methods, loosely cutting paper shapes so that, in the finished works, boundaries bulge and wobble, and corners sometimes break apart. The pieces call to mind a more sensually organic, tactile homage to Matisse's cutouts. They stand as an important moment of departure in her Dieu Donné work, a moment at which Shepherd determined to utilize her gift for creating depth with sparse and precise visual cues while also discovering new potential in spontaneous make-shift templates.

A second series does away with echoing pattern and line altogether, this time distributing color only in solid blocks arranged in stout, centered structures. As Shepherd composed these pieces, she sought to convey the imagined weight of each stack and block, placing them one atop the other to give an illusion of interdependence. These constructs seem more playful than the patterned pieces—reminiscent of parti-colored toddler toys left unattended—but something about their solitude on blank fields of neutral color undermines that initial impression. Rather than communicating a sense of carelessness or caprice, these towers reveal the somber aspect of Shepherd's painterly sensibility. One of her comments comes to mind: while contemplating the attenuated structure in *The Fullish Circle (Scaffolding on Four Greys)* she said, "I know a painting is finished when I find something human in it that I can latch on to." If Shepherd's large-scale paintings succeed in creating sympathetic objects behind their mirror surfaces, her small-scale block pieces do so more sweetly and intimately because of their size and child-like construction. Some are defiant, stubborn and sturdy, comprising only two or three boxes heaped in low piles; some communicate lightness and naïveté, gesturing with long, curved arms; some support themselves with slender columns, or balance warily atop steep triangles—they are achingly insightful portraits of characters unknown. Pathos aside, the block pieces reflect Shepherd's excitement about the game of compositioning, and they are a testament to her ability to recall with a few simple gestures the mathematical logic of Renaissance paintings—but it is the subtle humanness beneath this elegant logos that captivates the viewer.

Since her visits to The Mill were often weeks apart, Shepherd was able to treat each session with a fresh, personal approach, pushing the technique to suit her specific interests. Her final and most unexpected paper series furthers the formal tactics of the block pieces, but emphasizes space rather than objects. These pieces use

the paper to muse and reminisce on imaginary apartment floor plans; they are diagrammatic images, but collapse interwoven boundaries onto a single plane so that they read both as pure abstractions and as measured representations. The sense of vulnerability present in the block series continues here, but the apartment compositions seem to protect themselves, coiling inward to create rooms in which change halts and the unpredictable exterior world is locked out. There is a sense of meaning and urgency to building a personal space, and it surfaces in her depictions of finite interiors; perhaps these pieces betray the artist's desire to escape uncertainty into a space where balance remains permanent once achieved. They are the purest extension of Shepherd's drive to create other worlds, and their intimacy is striking, especially when compared with the vast spaces in her paintings. In this final series, the paper materials drew the artist farthest away from her long-held tactics, but somehow closer to the core of her interests.

Shepherd recalls an interviewer's attempt to describe her work: "When they asked if I was following Mondrian, I realized how easy it is to miss the mark with a description." She never attempts to categorize her work, nor to explain her intentions with neatly-packaged phrases, and rarely takes comparisons lightly. Rather than adhering to a particular movement, she follows her obsessions, playing out conflicts between opposing internal forces—the *machinations of composition* versus spontaneity, the interplay between rationality and emotion. "Passion can guide us, emotion can provide a foundation for our work," she says. "But for me there is always a subsequent movement to rules. We feel something, and then we substantiate it with logic." Her commitment to these core questions, rather than to a particular style or medium, made it possible for Shepherd to fully embrace the unfamiliar circumstances of the Dieu Donné residency, maintaining the force of her accustomed approach without requiring herself to determine the outcome beforehand. The Dieu Donné series is a beautiful exploration and might even have influenced the tone of her subsequent work.