

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

An American in Paris: Shirley Jaffe's Paintings from the 1970s

By John Yau on October 27, 2013

About her work, Shirley Jaffe has stated: "I want a certain tenseness, a congestion or a combination of forms in which none is stronger than any other. I'm interested in the idea of coexistence." In her current exhibition, *Shirley Jaffe: Paintings from 1970s*, at Tibor de Nagy (October 17–November 23), there are six paintings, most of which were done around the middle of the decade. They remain fresh.



Shirley Jaffe, *The Black Line*, 1974, oil on canvas, 51.25 x 76.75 inches, (130.2 x 195cm), Courtesy Tibor de Nagy, New York

A longtime resident of Paris — she moved there in 1949 — the American-born Jaffe has never fit into any of the narrative views of postwar American art. Although she was born two years before Joan Mitchell, and knew her, along with many of the American artists who lived in Paris in the first decade after the end of World War II — including Norman Bluhm, Sam Francis and Al Held — Jaffe went in a very different direction, pictorially speaking, from her peers. What distinguishes her work from these and other painters of that period is the tenseness that she cites in her interview.

It seems to me that Jaffe's independence from fashionable styles and accepted conventions — particularly when it comes to all-overness and consistent color — should be more widely celebrated. One likely reason that it hasn't been is because viewers have either mistakenly connected her work to such possible antecedents as Stuart Davis, which it superficially resembles, but was not influenced by, or they have focused on the fact that Henri Matisse was an early inspiration, without recognizing how different her work is from his. Here, I want to raise a point that Frank O'Hara made, which is that it's the viewer's job to see and address differences, rather be satisfied with pointing out similarities. In light of Jerry Saltz's recent lump-them-all-together screed, "Art's Insidious New Cliché: Neo-Mannerism," I think it would do well to remember O'Hara's position vis-a-vis similarity.

I would also point to Jaffe's hard-edged paintings of the 70s, which are not Abstract Expressionist, Minimalist or Pop. I would go further and say that they don't look like anyone else's and, more importantly, they don't look like each other. This alone sets her off from her peers, including the other Americans who lived and worked in Paris in the 1950s, from Ellsworth Kelly to Jack Youngerman. The tension running through the best paintings is tectonic; each image is held in place by what's around it, even as it pushes back, seeking a bit more air.

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

ESTABLISHED 1950



Shirley Jaffe, *The White Line*, 1975, oil on canvas, 77.25 x 85 inches, (196.2 x 216cm), Courtesy Tibor de Nagy New York

Urban cacophony is one of Jaffe's recurring preoccupations, the collage that makes up any city, and one's kaleidoscopic memory of its particulars. That Jaffe is able to evoke this with a configuration of images and colors that resist translation, while seeming familiar, is the wonder of her work.

In "The White Line" (1975), a meandering, diagonal white line, which is framed by wider, straight-edged band that is blue on the right side and green on the left, spans the entire painting from the bottom to the top, dividing it into two trapezoidal areas. On the right side, a black triangle abuts the diagonally placed straight-edged band with its crooked white line framed by blue and green. The combination evokes a volumetric triangle, whose top edge is formed by the blue-and-green framed white line.

At the same time, a diagonal brown band, tilting as it rises from the painting's bottom section, seems like a diving board extended over an abyss. Yet, as soon as I single out this configuration, it begins to dissolve into other possibilities as the forms around it vie for attention. Jaffe's paintings tend to have a multitude of focal points or — to put it another way — they are populated from side to side and top to bottom by images of interest. In the right trapezoid, Jaffe has depicted a stack of triangles — it resembles a three pale, geometric Christmas trees balanced on top of each other, like a gymnastics act. In an adjacent area, the figure-ground relationship keeps changing.

In "Upside-Down New York" (1974), the various sections, which are lined up like suspects in an investigation, may fit snugly together, but each has a distinct personality and palette that makes them not interchangeable. At the same time, the large middle section, which consists of two different tans neatly bifurcated by a slightly diminishing band of dark red running from the bottom edge to the top, evokes skyscraper canyons cutting through city streets flooded by a maroon light at sunset.

Jaffe uses different palettes and combinations of color throughout each painting. These distinct combinations infuse each of the painting's sections with its own individuality. Something different is found in each section, a self-contained color or graphic sign. The fact that Jaffe can lash them all together without resorting to any obvious visual device is nothing short of remarkable. Jaffe carefully calibrates the dissonance running through her best paintings. Every image is distinct and part of something larger; and the larger parts are prevented from subjugating other sections.

One could say that Jaffe's paintings are visual experiments in democracy. They are quietly tough and down-to-earth. I was reminded of the first and only time I spent with Jaffe in Paris, nearly twenty years ago. She hailed a taxi so we could go to where she lives and works. Once we were in the taxi, Shirley told the cabbie where to go in French, which she speaks with a thick American accent — part Brooklyn, part New Jersey. When the cabbie complained that he could not understand her, Jaffe let out a torrent of swear words and condemnations. The cabbie immediately changed his tune, recognizing that Jaffe must have lived in France for a long time, because her French curses were flawless. This fierceness and pride are everywhere to be found in Jaffe's work.