

***Marilyn Lerner: Memory is a Fickle Thing***

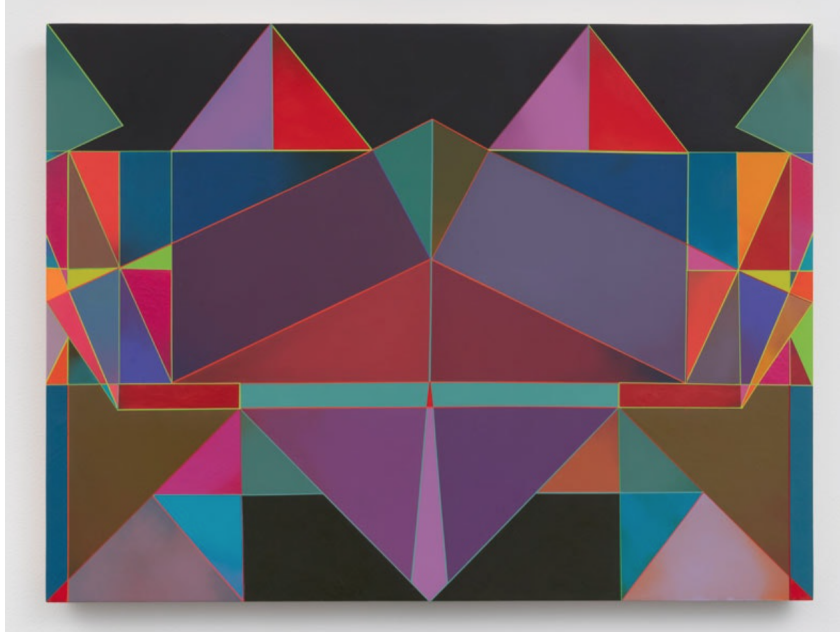
**Mary Jones**

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Installation view, *Marilyn Lerner: Memory is a Fickle Thing*, Kate Werble Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Kate Werble Gallery, New York. Photo: Adam Reich.

By coincidence, David Novros, Al Loving, Alan Shields, and Marilyn Lerner all have work up in NYC during December. These same four artists all danced in the late sixties, sometimes together, with the experimental choreographer Ellen Klein, in performances she staged in her loft on Broadway. The comparisons of their artistic development since this heady time are rich. For Lerner, the improvisation of dancing with Klein's company became her bridge from sculpture and to painting, where she felt the same kind of physical freedom. This is powerfully evident in her third solo show at Kate Werble Gallery, *Memory is a Fickle Thing*, which comprises thirteen radiant paintings, all oil on panel, and all made since 2022.



Marilyn Lerner, *Memory is a Fickle Thing*, 2023. Oil on wood, 24 × 32 inches. Courtesy the artist and Kate Werble Gallery, New York. Photo: Adam Reich.

Lerner is known for her intuitive, rapturous color sense that moves the eye across kaleidoscopic geometric compositions. The musicality of her work is notable, and her utilization of harmony, symmetry, and structure are all in full form in these new works. In the titular *Memory is a Fickle Thing* (2023), Lerner's composition unfolds along a vertical axis with a symmetrical design, which is then variegated by subtle shifts in color tonalities from left to right. The strength of the contrasting dimensional forms invites illusions—dazzling hot red, fuchsia, and purple triangular shapes emerge from dark, nocturnal toned grounds. For example, the planar dimensions of a mask could be suggested and, in the same instant, the forethought of a futuristic architecture, one that is tantalizingly vibrant and optimistic. Every shape is outlined in a thin band of a contrasting color that enforces the sharpness of the edges and the particularity of each color. Lerner states she has no color theory beyond her intuition, which has been honed with a few ground rules—a concentration on warm and cool tones, and every color consisting of at least 3 hues. The results are mesmerizing and profoundly transporting. It's because of Lerner's particular mastery that our eye keeps moving through slippages of time, association, and spacial references. She embellishes the sensation of depth with soft gradations of opposite colors within some of the shapes, playfully suggesting recessive, illusionistic space.

The weight and heft of the wooden panel support has become essential to Lerner, a vestige of her years as a sculptor. She is partial to the physicality this surface provides along with its informal object-ness. She often maximizes the malleability of the supports by creating unconventional shapes. The largest piece in the show, *Persepolis* (2023), at 72" × 36" is a dynamic, nine-sided vertical panel with two strong inverse diagonal slopes on opposing sides, with a cinched center division delineating a stacked top and bottom. It reads as a glyph of some kind, but one with multiple interpretations, perhaps a letter, building, or fragment. Nothing repeats. The surface is patterned with intricate,

overlapping geometric forms, a polychromatic, pulsating field of burnt oranges and bright aqua blues energize the eye. Much smaller wedges of lemon yellows and citrus greens traverse to the far edges of the composition. Each shape is made separately, as for Lerner, the surface and opacity are of utmost importance. She builds the layers of paint upon the surface slowly, keeping the facture evenly worked, and imbued with her perfectionistic craft.



Marilyn Lerner, *They Call Him the Buddha and He Showed Me How to Dance*, 2023.  
Oil on wood, 36 × 36 inches. Courtesy the artist and Kate Werble Gallery, New York.  
Photo: Adam Reich.

*They Call Him the Buddha and He Showed Me How to Dance* (2023) is the only tondo in the show, although this is a familiar format for Lerner. Composed like a mariner's compass, eight smokey blue and black pie shapes divide the circle in equal parts, their thin outlines becoming spokes radiating from a bright, chromatic wheel. At the outer edge they are capped with triangles and slivers of circles in luminous color. Lerner attributes the title of the painting to dancing with Steve Paxton at a party sometime in the late sixties, a chance encounter that led her to dance and a new direction in her work. Critic Jessica Holmes found Lerner's work evocative of jazz, and these paintings certainly have the visual snap of Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1942–1943), but also the expansive search of Alice Coltrane.

In conversation at the gallery Lerner described her work as formed by the cumulation of many experiences, her extensive travels through East Asia, Turkey, and Morocco as well as introspective decades in the studio. For Lerner, a painting should be "something intangible—that takes you somewhere to give you an experience." And in *Memory is a Fickle Thing*, she generously succeeds.