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Progress Report: Marina Adams's Recent Paintings and Gouaches

By John Yau



When I was looking at Marina Adams's five large paintings in her terrific debut exhibition, *Marina Adams: Soft Power*, at Salon 94 Bowery (January 13–February 22, 2017), I felt that she shared something with the superb colorist, the Russian-born Serge Poliakoff (1908–1969), who, while he remains little known in America, gained a number of ardent fans who saw his work in Paris, where he lived and worked for many years, Shirley Jaffe, Brice Marden, and Jonathan Lasker, among them. The eye-opening survey exhibition, *Serge Poliakoff*, at Cheim & Read (March 31–April 30, 2016), thoughtfully curated by the artist and critic Joe Fyfe, was his first large show in America in thirty years. That exhibition introduced us to a postwar artist working in Europe in the 1950s and '60s who had fallen from grace and was not looked at seriously for many years, either in Europe or America.

After leaving Adams's show, I went home and looked up the review of the Poliakoff exhibition that Rob Colvin wrote for *Hyperallergic* (April 27, 2016) — I remember thinking it was very smart — and came across this line:

The works sustain a restless equilibrium.

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Colvin's description seems a useful way to begin thinking about the paintings and works on paper in, Marina Adams: *Soft Power*. There are a lot of differences between Adams and Poliakoff, too many to enumerate. I would say the most important one is the speed with which Adams seems to make her paintings. They are a combination of structure and improvisation, the latter a particularly American practice that comes from Abstract Expressionism and jazz. Adams's amalgamation of structure, line, and color places her in the strain of abstract painting that seems to have originated in New York in the mid-1980s, when Mary Heilmann began showing again after a long hiatus, and dates back earlier to Lee Krasner's paintings with floral forms. They seem effortless, though that is not the case.

The rounded edges of Adams's biomorphic forms suggest that they are — as the exhibition's title suggests — soft. While some of forms are interlocking or held in place by other forms, their grip on each other does not seem permanent; their shapes feel slippery and even liquid. They nestle inside each other, occupying a zone between floppy and flat, rounded and pointed. It is as if the hard-edged geometric abstraction of Ellsworth Kelly has loosened its grip. In three of Adams's paintings, the forms extend part way in from the painting's left and right edges, like phalluses, big thumbs, breasts, or flower petals, creating an implied S-shape (sometimes made of two adjoining shapes) spanning from the painting's top to bottom edge. By making forms that push in from the right and left edges, the central shape feels squeezed, as in "Bigger" and "Alice When She's 10 Feet Tall." The dynamic tension of the pressing and pressed forms is erotic.

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Adams paints in acrylic on linen. The five large, vertical paintings, measuring 88 by 78 inches, are largest ones she has ever shown. She almost never uses primaries, preferring secondary colors, which are mixed and muted. The paint is matte and, in some areas of the work, you can see where she has added another layer of color over a shape to readjust its edge or to change the hue. This is true of “Second Sun” and “Standing On My Head.”

There is at least one shape in each painting that is blue, magenta, or violet. There is only one other contemporary abstract painter I can think of, Judy Ledgerwood, who uses these colors regularly. Is it because they bring to mind Matisse or because they are too decorative? In the end, Adams makes these colors her own, largely because she never uses them in the same combination with other colors. In fact, each painting has a different and distinct palette in which one of the colors comes from the blue-violet end of the spectrum.

This is Adams's breakthrough show. There is nothing formulaic about her use of color, line or shape. The paintings are eccentric, but do not feel willfully so. There is a constant tension along the borders where the forms meet — a push-and-pull surge. When Adams makes a pattern of irregular, diamond-like shapes across the entire painting, as she does in the title work, “Soft Power,” she alternates repeating and non-repeating colors and shapes. “To speak of joy and to sing of it,” Wallace Stevens wrote in his poem, “It Must Give Pleasure.” In Adams's paintings and gouaches, the high-spirited pleasure of making comes across in the specificity of every shape, line, and color. It is the oddness and the likelihood of something unexpected happening in the painting — both in the shapes and colors — that makes them distinct. In “Bigger,” the forms pushing from the left and right are white, while the shape between them is deep purple topped by dark green. So we go from high contrast to tonal shift in the blink of an eye. We see the white shapes as both abstract and figural. The logic of the painting is internal. We accept it or we do not.

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The palette of “Second Sun” — which is my favorite painting in the show — includes magenta, green, cerulean blue, and white. The rest of the colors are quieter, forming rounded, sexual shapes pressing in from both sides against the magenta shape running down the middle. A dusty cerulean blue bar bisects the magenta shape. The structure enables color and value to push against each other; attaining a “restless equilibrium.” This is what holds our attention; the colors don’t sit still, but flutter like pinned butterflies.

At the same time, Adams’s planes of color — from solid to dusty to layered — feel illuminated from within; they give off a soft glow (there is that word again, soft). In no other painting does Adams repeat these colors. This alone should be reason for the viewer to slow down, to contemplate how shape, line, and color interact, to discover the various moods it might stir up.

It is in the gouaches — most of which are 12 by 9 inches, many of them done in 2015 — that Adams investigates broadly diverse combinations of color and tonality. Proportionally, they echo the dimensions of her paintings. In some of the gouaches, she works with closely related hues, while in others she pushes one color hard against another. The matte surfaces, transparency, interior light, and solid color of the shapes in the gouaches laid the groundwork for the paintings. It is not always the case that an artist can enlarge her scale and make the paintings more commanding, but this is certainly true of Adams’s recent work. Having come this far — her fans (of which I am one) — wish her well on her continuing journey.

Marina Adams: Soft Power continues at Salon 94 Bowery (243 Bowery, Manhattan) through February 22.