

The Brooklyn Rail

Critical Perspectives on Art, Politics and Culture

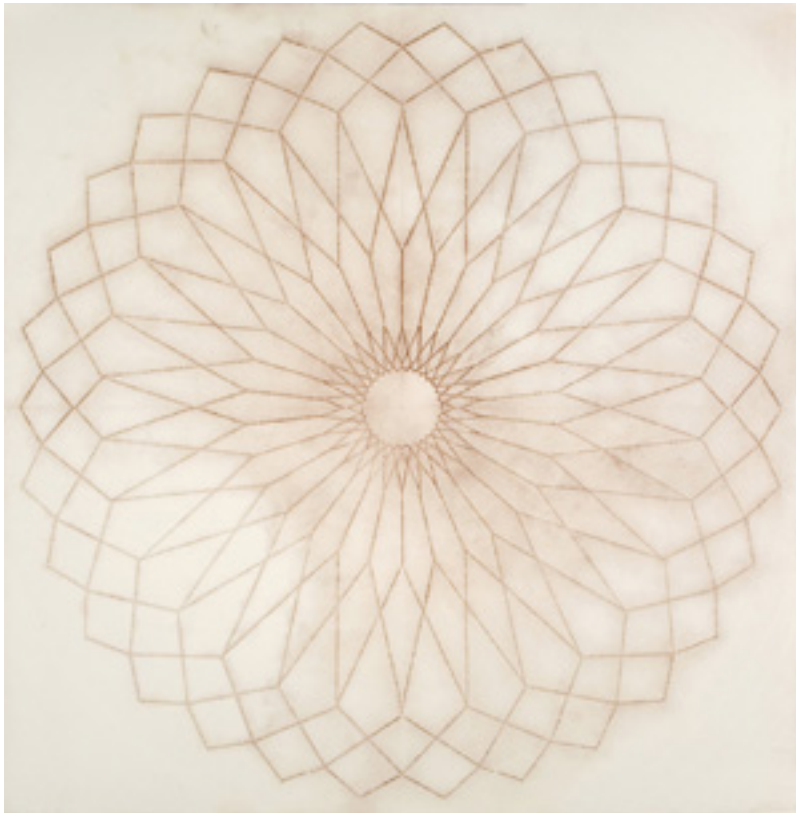
MAR 2011

BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

MARY JUDGE *Pop-Oculus: new works in pigment* by Thomas Micchelli

STOREFRONT | JANUARY 28 – FEBRUARY 20, 2011

There is a perfect stillness to Mary Judge's installation at Storefront. Most of the works are on paper, mounted in two ranks: framed under glass at eye level and unframed above. Their imagery is radial. There are also a few small, rectangular canvases, strategically hung to animate otherwise empty sections of wall. Tying it all together is a primary-colored wall drawing, its intersecting vectors stretching from floor to ceiling, curving slightly on a bowed juncture between the front of the gallery and the back.



Mary Judge, "Oculus No.1" (2008). Dry pigment on paper. 30 × 30".
Courtesy of the artist and Storefront.

Judge's medium is pigment, period—art-making at its most elemental. She uses the centuries-old *spolvero* technique (transferring an image by pouncing a pigment-filled pouch across a perforated drawing) not as a transitional step in the manner of Renaissance fresco painters or contemporary figurative artists such as Alex Katz and Neil Welliver, but as an end in itself. She does so not with an ironic detachment from the past but with a lover's embrace: an approach so replete with aesthetic hazards that one is tempted to list bullet points enumerating them all.

With her pigment pouch, intricately architectonic patterning, and, until a recent switch to full color, earth tones and monochrome, what Judge is most obviously risking is historicism—a peril perhaps compounded by the significant amount of time the artist spends in Italy. This factor comes to the fore most acutely in her “Oculus Series” drawings (2008), which resemble High Gothic rose windows (which Judge used as a motif for a series of relief print monotypes in 2006) or schemas for Renaissance floor tiles. Yet what should appear to the practiced eye, in both image and facture, as steeped in nostalgia, instead shimmers with a curiously disquieting, intangibly sensual magnetism.

This is truly beguiling—but the immediate effect of Judge's art, as palpably pleasurable as it is, promptly dissolves into a blur of theoretical and historical conjecture the closer you look at and think about what's in front of you. Its complexity cannot be untangled simply through allusions to the remote or recent past (the Renaissance or Minimalism), which are ultimately flat and illustrational; rather, it demands a route through the knotty implications of the artist's procedures. These artworks are pure material, and whatever meanings they impart—about history, gender, or form—arise from how they are made.

While her technique varies little from that of her forebears (it should be noted that *spolvero*, despite the painstaking labor involved, is so straightforward in its execution that it defies alteration or innovation), Judge's decision to present pounced perforations or stenciled patterns as finished works of art creates a metaphorical feedback loop: we look at what was made both as a connotative image and as the residue of its making. It's a quintessential interstice, simultaneously nailed down (the exactitude of the symmetrical forms) and open-ended (the stencil's implied reproducibility and the random scatterings of pigment). The artwork, as an imprint of its in-between stage, suggests that it is in a perpetual state of becoming.

At its core, Judge's art can be viewed as an image of an image of time. This subtle but distinct splitting, whether consciously intended or not, would seem to account for its singular urgency. The humanist ideal that originated with the Renaissance is such a manifestly irreducible component of her aesthetic bloodline that it all but insists upon acknowledgment if she is to maintain the integrity of her work and assert the totality of her thinking. Yet what she does with this tenet is unique, positioning it in terms of a preordained procedure (the stenciling and pouncing) whose exacting requirements mimic the immutable cultural paths furrowed by a diversity of traditions. Once these requirements are satisfied, the process is consummated in an image arising, literally, from a cloud of dust.

Put another way, the process is the work—in every sense of the word—and the image is the revelation. A loaded term to be sure, but entirely defensible if applied to the unforeseeable optical consequences of arbitrarily settling particulates. Any other associations would be up to you to take or leave. However you wish to think of it, Judge's imagery clearly stands at the endpoint of a thoroughgoing, physical inquiry, which endows it with a disconcerting fusion of rigor and intimacy. While it would be entirely conceivable, practically speaking, for a third party to assemble one of her pieces according to a set of instructions à la Sol LeWitt, to do so would be to contradict its nature. Judge doesn't appear invested in that category of autonomy, nor does she, like the Minimalists with whom she is so often compared, attempt to strain art of its essence; rather, she casts a net over its expanse and sifts through the wriggling, slippery catch with her own hands. Hers is an art of inclusion refracted through discernment, of a thousand discrete pinpricks resolving into a continuity of perception. The perfect stillness we feel in the presence of her work is the mantric intensity of labor curling into the ethereal serenity of repose.