

KAY HARVEY: LIKE WATER OR FIRE

A capriccio is Italian for “following one’s fancy” and most often refers to an imaginative, unpredictable musical composition. Kay Harvey’s new show at 222 Shelby Street Gallery is called *Capriccio*, and it’s aptly named. Surveying the artist’s work, one might certainly conclude that she is nothing if not free-spirited and delightfully improvisational. This month-long exhibition spans a period of twenty-six years and encompasses two gallery locations. As such it offers a comprehensive look at Harvey’s ever-evolving artistic career. Within the range of styles on display, the artist’s lively approach is evident throughout; this abiding quality of energetic individuality is consistent with Harvey’s apparent intent on getting paint onto paper—or Mylar or aluminum, as the case may be, in the most dynamic way possible.

Harvey has spent much time abroad, with residencies in New York City, Italy, France, Spain, and India, and she understandably cites travel as a major source of artistic inspiration. Time spent under the tutelage of such artistic heavyweights as Richard Diebenkorn and Lynda Benglis has had a great influence on the variety and tone of her artistic style, which Benglis lauded as “a much realized, ritual motion of what a painting ... can be said to be about: color, texture, light and surface.” Harvey is a long-time New Mexican with Southwestern roots. Her late father had an office on Shelby Street and the family acquired the adjacent building, presently the 222 Shelby Street Gallery, in 1976; it wasn’t, however, specifically an arts space until 2008 when Harvey began informally showing her own work there.

According to Harvey, she is drawn to and becomes “interested in the subject like water or fire and I work until there is no more energy in it for me to express.” Indeed, her artistic output is demonstrative of an ability to deftly navigate dynamic themes of chaos and composure, and her propensity toward examining contextual tension is forcefully evidenced in *Strocoto VII (Vietnam)*. The work’s parenthetical title hints at conflict, and this piece accordingly provokes an intense reaction in the viewer. From below, a jaunty black curve dips upward to create an ersatz cradle. The area directly above is lined with sharp red scratches that add a peculiarly visceral element to the painting, but these anxious marks are countered with the nearby presence of calm, hazy gray pillars. A thrilling splash of orange hovers over the lower elements of the piece, as if poised to descend upon or else absorb them. These disparate components of color and shape, which have the potential to appear disjointed, are compositionally and aesthetically sound, and the painting’s aluminum backdrop adds an edgy quality to the work.

Sometimes Harvey’s ebullient use of hue and texture can overwhelm the eye, which is the ultimate effect of *Elements 01*. In keeping with the general tone of Harvey’s work, this large painting is vibrant and free-spirited, but feels somewhat unfocused and forced in its predilection for exuberance. *Elements* is indeed chromatically exciting, but the high-wattage blues and bright banana yellows seem to compete for canvas space, and the same red dashes that added a titillating tension to *Strocoto VII (Vietnam)* feel splayed and busy here. By the artist’s own admission she likes her colors to, “blend and bend and obscure and reflect

and transmit and become form again.” Nevertheless, she’s best when more discernibly focused, as demonstrated in works like *Untitled, Pentimento Series*. Here Harvey has layered pigments and textures in an intelligently delegated way that is nevertheless replete with spontaneity and whimsy. Colors are wisely chosen and come in moderate doses. Cake-batter yellows share the stage with soft siennas and mossy greens, and the work is dominated by a smooth stretch of cornflower blue that seems to float just above the canvas. This shimmering azure form is hypnotically aloof; its apartness from the rest of the composition is deftly realized and the effect is of some leisurely cloud passing over an otherworldly landscape.

This compelling exhibition includes a number of collages and small drawings, with the artist’s sense of color and

texture rarely skipping a beat. Harvey has acknowledged that thematic relationships do indeed appear throughout her work, but that overt likenesses within serial groupings are largely inadvertent. This unplanned cohesion is intriguing, and it endears us to an artist whose oeuvre seems vastly innovative and yet recognizably her own. Thanks to the breadth and variety of work on display here, *Capriccio* is a special opportunity to see an unabashedly adventurous local artist who has molded a distinct narrative for herself. With steadfast fidelity to her personal vision, Kay Harvey is seemingly unimpeded by mimicry or boredom, and her artistic career evinces an admirable expression of the creative impulse.

—IRIS MCLISTER



Kay Harvey, *Untitled, Pentimento Series*, oil on linen, 96" x 72", 2001