



## Playing Field: A Conversation with Jen Wink Hays

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Jen Wink Hays' first solo exhibition at New York gallery Sears-Peyton features more than twenty new paintings in oil and gouache that interweave prismatic color forms in a complex interplay of spaces. Hays, who grew up in coastal Maine and lived in New York for twenty-five years, now lives and works in Philadelphia. In what follows, Hays explains some of the sources and resonances of her recent work.

**Amy Rahn:** Can you talk about the title for the show? What does *Playing Field* represent for you?

**Jen Wink Hays:** The paintings in "Playing Field" have a spread, out, dynamic quality that makes me think of a freeze frame at a sporting event, as if the figures are engaged in some sort of physical interplay with a set of rules and a clear boundary line. I have always explored various groupings and densities of forms as a way of creating a visual story and dynamic tension in my paintings. In this body of work, I have moved away from more complex, interlocking color zones to more solid, simple backgrounds. With a simplified color "field," I have been able to highlight the drama, movement and interrelatedness between forms.

The title is also a play on the word "field"— like the fields of tall grass and wildflowers that I was surrounded by as a kid in Maine and that have inspired so much of my work over the years. The field that jumps most readily in my mind's eye is the untouched, ten-acre field that used to separate my childhood home from my grandparents' house. My brother and I spent a lot of time walking back and forth across the mowed path not giving it much thought, but subconsciously charting the changes that each season would bring; green poking through in the spring, scattered lupine and dandelions with a layer of hovering bugs in the summer, fireflies at night. My paintings are in some ways a refracted and personalized interpretation of the natural world that I grew up in.

**AR:** I've noticed you sometimes use oil, and sometimes gouache—what determines your use of each medium?

**JWH:** In any medium, my work tends to incorporate opaque blocks of color without a lot of blending or gradation. Transitions from color to color are most often strong and clear. With a good amount of medium mixed in, I can get these incredibly dense, opaque

flowing masses of color with oil paint. This lends itself to the subtractive, covering-over process that I incorporate while working on canvas.

The pieces on paper are more carefully constructed and entirely additive. It is more about careful use of whitespace and playing around with dense clusters of clean, sharper shapes. Gouache gives me the kind of coverage and opacity that I'm looking for when I do this work on paper.

**AR:** In your statement you write about concealing and revealing—what are the references for concealing and revealing that you find most relevant to your work? In other words, do you connect to the concealing/revealing concept more as a metaphor, or more formally—in a push/pull Hans Hofmann kind of way?

**JWH:** Both, I suppose, although it is more of a formal, literal visual tension that I'm pursuing. I'm not trying to present an objective reality in my oil paintings (the gouache on paper work is a bit more ambiguous in that regard). The concealing and revealing that I'm working with is just a very matter of fact exploration of layering and juxtaposing – searching for provocative relationships. In the metaphorical realm, I find resonance as well – although this is mostly layered on after the fact. I'm happy to leave the metaphorical interpretation to the individual viewer.

**AR:** Your palette seems very specific. Can you talk about the colors you choose?

**JWH:** I use color to control the intensity and story of a piece. Most works have neutral, grounding tones mixed with some brighter, flashier ones as well. A huge part of the work that I do in the studio each day is finding my way to color resolutions that work for me or get me excited. There is a balance that must be struck between soft and hard, bold and subdued, so that a given painting feels alive and resolved at the same time. I know that I'm drawn to certain base colors over and over, but I'd like to think no color is off-limits.

**AR:** Does place have any bearing on your work? Do you see vestiges of your surroundings showing up in your paintings?

**JWH:** I definitely ruminate about the geography of my life while I work – where I come from and how it shaped my view of things, where I live now and how it shapes my view of things. I'm not really coming from a nostalgic place although my earliest environments come up for me a lot, particularly in my works that are more suggestive of natural, field-born forms. And the impulse to juxtapose organic and synthetic elements in the work relates to the pull that I feel in my life between a busy, sharp edged city life and the simpler, softer environment that I came up in.

**AR:** Do you think your works are related to architecture? To design?

**JWH:** Not directly, no.

**AR:** Who are the artists that most inspire you, and how do they inspire you?

**JWH:** Phillip Guston, because of his ability to surprise and delight and his uncharacteristic forms, colors, and compositions. There's something very blatant and unafraid about his work and yet it is *so* appealing visually. His work has an element of humor as well, but it isn't like he is delivering a simple visual punchline with his hairy, smoking cubic volumes. He seems to be communicating something that is important to him with a highly distinctive personal language. I love the way he combines generalized abstracted forms with entirely literal, recognizable ones – as a viewer, this keeps me slightly off kilter.

Milton Avery, because of his mind-blowing use of paint and color. Pure mastery there. When I'm walking through a giant art fair and a painting catches my eye and draws me in, 80% of the time it is by Milton Avery. There is something so personal in the way he presents subject matter, with some aspects highly distorted or nearly abstracted while others are perfectly realistic. He has used the medium of paint to show us a new way of seeing but unlike the cubists (for example), he manages to create jaw-droppingly beautiful paintings at the same time.

Helen Frankenthaler, because I want to eat her paintings. Or live in them. More than any other artist I can think of, she demonstrates how a purely abstract painting can have an arc and a complete story.

**AR:** Do you perceive anything that's changed in these works from what you were making before?

**JWH:** I'm definitely pushing into more solid, monochrome backgrounds in this recent body of work as a way of simplifying and emphasizing certain aspects but also as a way of featuring and elevating the forms themselves. It is clear with these oil paintings that large parts of the painting have been covered over and I think this amplifies the tension that exists between what is shown and what is hidden – concealing and revealing. The white space in the paper works create a similar dramatic foreground/background effect where the forms themselves are more highlighted than they would be if they were in a more complex, fully-painted field. Some of the pieces where the shapes are more evenly spaced give off a greater sense of potential energy, as if all the players have taken their positions and are waiting for the starting whistle.