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TLM09: Agnes Barley

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“The question is always, *Where?*” says the painter Agnes Barley, “though it’s not always about proximity or place. *Where is meaning, where is connection, where is life and time and stillness?*” Barley’s idiosyncratic use of such a specific adverb seems curious at first, but it provides a critical clue to the dynamics of her work. An unorthodox understanding of place and spatial mechanics animates Barley’s tranquil, delicate abstractions, one that doesn’t always dovetail with the conventional methods of locating the objects of our everyday experience.

Barley’s work is indebted to giants of modern color field painting such as Ellsworth Kelly, as well as the elegantly controlled gestures of contemporary artists like Elliott Puckette. In her compositions, crisp, sharp-edged shapes in subtle hues are moored against a warm, neutral backdrop. Barley’s works are often collages; using a thin veil of paint to create “idealized brushstrokes,” she administers rich jewel tones and subtle pastels to paper, which she then cuts and applies to an empty ground.

Especially when viewed in sequence, the interior logic of Barley’s choices emerges as an elegant pattern language, both lexical and visual—part tangram, part mesostic. In some series, certain groups of shapes are employed as footings, anchoring the variations in color and composition that individualize each piece. Each completed collage feels like a component in a private grammar that lends itself to further study.

Despite their distilled appearance, Barley’s works are not always pure abstractions. Her compositions are often inspired by fleeting natural phenomena and retain a suggestion of form. She chose to study waves, she says, because she views them as “a suggestion of place that is tied to time.” Her waves—slender rectangles and triangles that skew at oblique angles—are influenced by the depiction of the Nile in ancient Egyptian art, a seemingly never-ending march of uniform triangles that suggests the unyielding power of time over all living things.

Barley seeks to “create forms that are a reflection of how we’re situated in the world,” she says. While her early pieces were rooted in the conventions of traditional landscape painting, more recent works have been distilled down, their compositions derived from marks that are more suggestion than indelible gesture. Whether gently touching or floating at discrete distances from each other, the shapes that make up her works suggest the relationships that are the meat of human experience.

Even with her light touch, Barley is fascinated with structure, restriction, and the visual tension that results from the two-dimensional construction of three-dimensional architectural space. A trace of orthogonal projection persists in many of her compositions, from her “Shadow Structures” series through to her more recent “Waves” group, although she notes that “nothing is truly orthogonal” in her work. Instead, Barley’s newer pieces are “folding landscapes,” she says, their odd angles creating a quiet sense of perspective and depth that very often leads the viewer inward.

Her latest works are even more suggestive of interiority, a beguiling amalgam of presence and absence. “Void and landscape are equally important,” she notes, adding that “it’s been important for me to forge a relationship between something and nothing.”

A new book of Barley’s paintings, published by J&L, is scheduled for release later this year, in conjunction with a new exhibition at New York’s Blackston Gallery. In the meantime, Barley continues to hone the methodologies that have guided her practice from the start. Each time she succeeds in creating a harmonious relationship between shape and negative space, the result is nearly musical. “There’s a bell,” she says. “It’s almost tantric.”