



## Light, Through Fields of Color

By Lilly Wei

In 2004, Betty Merken made a painting called *Summer Fruit* that was crucial to her development as an artist. Halved into two canvases, one was brushed a succulent coral, like the flesh of a ripe melon while the other, green-gold, ribbed, netted, conjured its outer skin. The viewer could easily regard it, with or without its title, as a melon pared to its visual essence, more melon-like, arguably, than a realistic depiction. On the other hand, it could also be seen as non-objective. But, more completely, more alluringly, it could be considered both. It was the first such painting she had made, in which the focus was on the fluidity of exchange between the referential and non-referential.

In her latest body of paintings, made over the past two years, Merken continues to be deeply engrossed by abstraction's evocative range as it swings between the more representative and the less so, by the instability of perception. Her paintings are often generously scaled but not overwhelming, updated minimalist abstraction or color field painting (currently enjoying a resurgence, as is abstract painting in general). They are related to earlier modernist works such as Matisse's celebrated 1914 *View of Notre Dame*, Rothko's luminous rectangles, Morris Louis' stain paintings, as well as his veils and stripes, and Richard Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* series in their avid interest in color, light, architecture and process. They also consider Roman murals of architectural vistas, medieval palimpsests, Renaissance frescoes, and much more, an homage to the past filtered through a contemporary lens. Merken's inclusive aesthetics split between Western pictorial traditions and that of the Far East, the influence of Chinese literati and Japanese Zen paintings discernible in her work, as well as an affinity for decorative screens and design, for fabrics and textiles.

While Merken's canvases are spare in terms of delineated imagery, they are rich in paint and color, created out of layerings of translucent and opaque hues, steadied by an elegant, fastidiously placed architectonic presence. Indeed, the tautness in her compositions is due to her embrace of antithesis and synthesis, instinctively balancing opposites to achieve a more resonant whole. Even more process-oriented than before, the drips, spills, stains and the effects of gravity are the prevailing imagery of these new paintings. It's a collaboration between the artist and her medium in which she both relinquishes control and reclaims it.

Her palette is keyed to specific geographical locations, sensitive to their tonalities and atmosphere, to their art and architecture. Italy has long been a resource for Merken, who spends much time there, captivated—as who is not?—by the lucidity of its colors and its matchless light. The humanistic proportions of its architecture, underscored by the alternation between solids and voids in Italian urban spaces, have also found their way into her consciousness and her work. Merken, as part of her process, looks for “accidental paintings” on the walls and facades of the storied towns and cities she has explored in her sojourns: Cortona, Orvieto, Otranto, Rome, Vitorchiano, others. Sketched by time, weather, and human intervention, it is the equivalence of these traces that, introduced into her compositions, lend them poignancy.

Merken is also an authority on color who frequently advises architects and designers on its use. Researching color is second nature to her, recording what she sees by means of digital photography and gouache swatches that she makes on site, replicating the color as precisely as possible. They are part of an archive that numbers nearly a thousand swatches to date. Referring to them when in the studio, these distillates of color, like a snapshot, reproduce a portrait of a place. Merken, as she has done since at least *Summer Fruit*, seeks the requisite, the immediate, the sensuous. She uses color as a musician might compose with notes or a perfumer with scent, eliciting subjective responses, none of which is entirely fixed, the most thrilling attribute of abstraction. Always alert to color wherever she is, in Rome she found a gold and red ochre; in Otranto, a milky white and an ultramarine and turquoise; in Civita di Bagnoregio, yellow ochres and a manganese violet; in Cortona, a green; in Spello, a range of lovely pinks and mauves. These colors, once recorded, become part of a lexicon and will appear elsewhere; they are also not fixed.

Likewise, although these paintings might be inspired by a specific locale, they are not illustrations of that locale. *Gravity* (2014) consists of a block of pale cool grey on the right that takes up almost half the painting. Next to it is a thinner strip that is nearly black, followed by a somewhat wider one that is lightened to a medium grey. The last strip is a grey that echoes the first. The light and dark act as a positive–negative juxtaposition of solid and space that can also read as purely two-dimensional, another instance of Merken’s oppositions, establishing a complex visual rhythm that toggles between advancement, retreat, and flatness. Narrow, overlapping rivulets of paint cascading downward merge to form these blocks, causing their surfaces to ripple. Emerging slowly from the field is a linear structure that seems a section of an isometric drawing that also projects forward, flattens, then dissolves into the ground, the painting inspired by the ancient hill town of Vitorchiano, Merken said, with its stone cave dwellings that hug the hillside.

*In the Pink* (2014), refers to the pink and mauve stone masonry of ancient Spello. It is also composed of streams of paint coursing downward, the canvas this time divided more or less horizontally, the upper register covered in a striated warm rose–brown that thins out in the lower register, revealing the array of colors beneath. Superimposed over it across the surface is a schematic architectural rendering in another shade of rose, cradling the entire painting, adding a

structural component to the flux of the paint as if it were a metaphoric vessel filled with time, like the stones that built the city, like the painting itself, the flow of color emblematic of the transient.

*Otranto* (2014) is similarly constructed, its stripes overlaid by a trio of parallel lines on the right that begins straight, then angles sharply as it descends before straightening out again on its way to the bottom edge. It is another striking juxtaposition of line and color, of the architectonic and the ephemeral, its lilting blues and greens recalling both the clear expanse of the Adriatic Sea that borders the Greco-Roman city and the blue and green shutters that edge most of the windows of its sunstruck limestone buildings.

Merken's blues are especially ravishing. In *Notte* (2014), it is a blue that Merken associates with the shadowed walls of Rome, seen at night. The painting is a diaphanous, delicately brushed, monochromatic curtain of modulated color and elusive shapes, its drips flowing in several directions, subsumed by the overall hue. A few trickles of slightly darker blue streak down the entire painting to form several undulating, continuous lines, just off center. They trickle to the bottom gracefully and suggest an outline of a slender column; they also suggest less polite dribbles, although gentrified, establishing yet one more contrast. *Lapis* (2014) is inspired by the lapis lazuli mosaics on the façade of Orvieto's Duomo. Burnished to incandescence, it is the deep, enchanted blue of the sky just before night finally falls. As always, these paintings are the uncanny translations of Merken's keen attentiveness to color, light and ambience and as always, they are deeply satisfying.