

Marcia Hafif  
*Glaze Paintings*



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**February 5 - 26, 2011**  
Essay by Mark Harris

**U · turn Art Space**  
2159 Central Avenue, Cincinnati OH





## Marcia Hafif

### *Glaze Paintings*

by Mark Harris

Eight small paintings, each titled after the pigment that comprises its single layer of colored paint, *Viridian*, *Indian Yellow*, *Cobalt Blue*,.... These are paintings brought out from storage to exert color pressure on the world. A pigment reservoir, they are as the last colors in a world becoming monochrome, decelerating the draining away of all hue. The gallery as a time garden, standing against the temporal flow that turns everything to gray. Hafif once described her practice as "treading water." She referred to a kind of painting that simply persisted, in spite of being confronted by widespread opinion, shared perhaps by the artist herself, that there existed no irrefutable reason for its continuation. With the relentless questioning of the perseverance of reflexive abstract painting coming from a fragmented and heterogeneous set of objectives for fine art, there came to be no position available but that of conserving a *routine* painting practice. By treading water Hafif meant not just staying afloat but also holding steady against the rapidly moving flow of heterogeneity.

The painting then supposedly provides an anchor in the flow of time and trends. Where the method of Hafif's paintings remains similar across decades, this anchor of treading water helps the artist reject alternative treatments that pass by in the flow, and helps her resist aging. The passing world ages while the artist remains as young as she was when she completed her first monochrome. A figurative analogy to Hafif's ontological predicament can be found in the great nineteenth-century illustrator J.J. Grandville's *Un Autre Monde*. One illustration called "Les Poisson D'Avril" shows fish at the top of a waterfall overlooking a river in which eight or nine

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1. Hafif spoke on a College Art Association panel in New York in the early 1990s



French bourgeois are treading water. Their rods hanging over the edge, the grinning fish dangle bottles of wine, medals, and trinkets as lures for the middle-class citizens who reach upwards desperately. An allegory of commodification, Grandville's illustration suggests you should be content with your element and not be distracted by alluring things from another milieu.

The paintings' color is all that is on the walls, all that is in the space. They are paintings made only of what the pigment provides. The paintings are just abandoned there dressed in the color they get. Orphan paintings. Is there a stinginess, an abandonment, enacted then by the artist? "This is all you're going to be, so put up with it" to both paintings and their audience. Is this what gives these paintings their apparent independence? They are like entities that don't need us—sullen, teenage paintings. Or are the paintings incommunicative because they are asleep? If they are asleep, do paintings dream? Do monochromes, the most introspective of paintings, dream more intensely? And if they are dreaming do they dream us, their audience? Is this what accounts for the feeling of irrelevance as a spectator in this gallery space, where the only "what is happening" is the sense of an indecipherable dreaming? No other reading is readily available; No other place for interpretation can be easily located.

Flat, evenly applied color, drawn down the canvas from top to bottom. Striations in the color reveal that the ground has, at one point, been brushed horizontally. Color has then been applied against the grain of the ground, a routine paint application rehearsed time and again and familiar to any painter. Whether or not the painting dreams, the painter paints detachedly, methodically, to forget what goes into making a painting. The painter's technique marks acts of forgetfulness, those points when, successfully, thoughts did not occur. It is a case of getting to the point where there can be no latent content to the paintings' dream, and where the manifest content is nothing other than the colors' properties. This is a new kind of dream then, one that is rigorously anti-anthropomorphic.

In "Getting on with Painting," a 1981 *Art in America* piece, Hafif first writes on what might be thought of as the avant-garde monochrome. Of course that "getting on" is a foretaste of Hafif's later "treading water." She has also written frequently about the role of subjectivity in the act of painting. I've found that interestingly paradoxical for a body of work that appears relatively desubjectivized. Isn't it more likely, that Hafif would be writing herself out of the picture(s) rather than in? Fair enough, the "writing in" is qualified by a quest for a kind of automatism, a comportment towards painting processes where desires and drives are suspended. There is then a right and wrong frame of mind for painting, a right kind of subjectivity, and, I suppose, a bad subjectivity.

Writing in 1981, that bad subjectivity could have been the neo-expressionism coming out of Germany and Italy, or even closer to New York from the East Village scene with its intense and unfiltered subjectivities, most often expressed through figurative painting. Consider this comment from Hafif's 1981 article: "As the painting begins, the artist adopts a state of mind...in which the act proceeds virtually on its own and the painter makes decisions while in a mental state appropriate for unconscious scanning or unfocused attention. Decisions follow an inner order but are produced less through conscious deliberation than through a visceral action/reaction process smoothly functioning in that mind state."<sup>2</sup> There is also this statement of Hafif's from 1984: "Having established the dimensions, the pigment, the medium, the brush, the painter is free to enter into the state of mind requisite for the creation of something new from nothing. The artist approaches the canvas with a clear mind and acts upon it in the present to bring forth the unknown which passes through him/her into being."<sup>3</sup> And then there is this remark from a 1989 article on the Lyon exhibition *Couleur Seule*: "A sense of seriousness, of subjectivity and spirituality, attaches to the purely perceptual, while the more conceptual the art, the more the artist appears to stand outside the work and comment on it. The work in the exhibition so deeply

2. Marcia Hafif, "Getting on with Painting," *Art in America*, April 1981, p133

3. Marcia Hafif, *Radical Painting*, p27, Williams College Museum of Art, 1984



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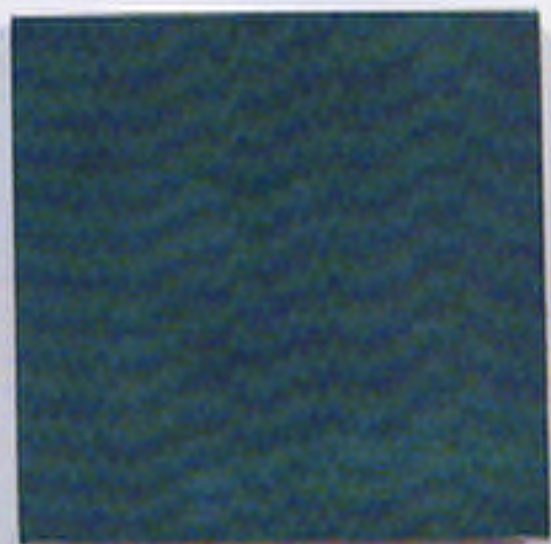
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expressed the sensibilities of the individual artists involved (contrary to what one might expect) that each painting manifestly stood for the person, the self, the character of the artist."<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding the unmistakable return of the subject in the last article, the good painting consciousness would then be relaxed, free of preoccupations, open to intuitions, spiritually inclined (though I wish I knew what "spiritual" meant). There is to be "nothing" there to begin with. That is why the preparation of materials and tools needs to be so thorough. That part of the task mustn't interfere with the state of attentiveness appropriate to the task of painting.

It's all very well that this concerns an aesthetics of production, but what about the audience? Does the audience really matter in the end? Does it matter if the audience perceives an utterly different set of affects to those that generated the painting? Hafif has little to say about reception until the 1989 article when she writes sparingly of her own reactions within a lengthy outline of criss-crossing histories of the genre—"This was a very beautiful show, beautifully installed...[on] thick white walls with high open doorways and none of the clutter found on most museum walls"<sup>5</sup>. So if we, as receivers, were to reflect on subjectivity in the paintings we might expect to discern those qualities of spiritual attentiveness that Hafif says mark the genesis of their fabrication.

Isn't it a bit strange then that the paintings are so self-sufficiently themselves? That there is no evident subjectivity within the objects? It's as if Hafif's idea of a painting that expresses the painter's sensibility and subjectivity does so only by marking its total absence. Within Hafif's argument this articulation of vacillating subjectivity seems to me a distinction, not a flaw, that tries to encompass the horizon of these complicated and ambiguous paintings, for a discourse was in play from the earliest

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4. Marcia Hafif, "True Colors," *Art in America*, June 1989, p131

5. Marcia Hafif, "True Colors," *Art in America*, June 1989, p130



discussions of the Radical Painters group of how to locate the subject in monochrome work that was so affirmatively subjectless. But what kind of subject is left after such rigorous opposition to a form of expressive painting that wears its author on the surface, as it were? Can you so thoroughly reject *that* author and still have some kind of subject? Looking again through *Radical Painting* you can see the tentative moves for authors to remain, but remain *behind* the painting, and within the choices of procedures, colors, and materials. The talk that flows in those Art in America articles (in April 1981 Carter Ratcliff wrote another essay adjacent to Halif's), and in a series of statements from artists' letters that follow in December that same year, forms the discourse of painters wary of overshadowing their work and wondering instead if a minor role alongside, or behind, their paintings can be found.

"...approaching the artwork strictly as a material entity and on recognizing the existence of no image other than that intrinsic to and inseparable from the art work's objectness. This kind of painting, as a creative act, is by definition *fundamental*." <sup>6</sup>

"One must deal with the elements and intrinsic limitations of the discipline: paint itself and its application, surface articulation, color, light, support, scale, physicality, image...All function and are interdependent." <sup>7</sup>

"A painting is specific as to shape and color. I consider Painting to be achromatic light within the essential ambiguity of space. *The painting is metamorphosis of a painting.* It becomes immanence and intuition: presence. It is a manifestation of Painting and an icon to itself." <sup>8</sup>

"painting/color concealing color/color revealing color/color penetrating color/color changing color/color generating color" <sup>9</sup>

"I work on the principal components of painting: the act of painting, its history (the awareness of itself), and on their reciprocity and circularity." <sup>10</sup>

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6. Joe Marioni, Art in America, letters, December 1981, p7

7. Howard Smith, Art in America, letters, December 1981, p155

8. Frederic Thursz, Art in America, letters, December 1981, p155

9. Raimund Girke, *Radical Painting*, Williams College Museum of Art, 1984, p25

10. Carmengloria Morales, *Radical Painting*, Williams College Museum of Art, 1984, p33







"Painting is painting. For the painter there can be no idea but in paint. What is unfortunate is that the intent of painting is being forgotten. Paint can become the bridge, to go beyond is to transgress upon the intent."<sup>11</sup>

"When I speak of Painting, I also speak of Paint, that physical, pre-given color substance in my painting, which not only materially but fundamentally differentiates itself."<sup>12</sup>

Within the early 1980s literature around monochrome painting is the stress on the need to preserve the values of pure painting. Those were the few years in New York when the idiom attracted substantial critical attention. In that writing it is hard to distinguish between analytical, celebratory, or defensive positions. Perhaps these three categories are always in play. The language never strays from defining a state of mind focused on material properties, on a rigor of preparation and application, on the experience of color or facture. If the attention had slackened for an instant, the focus drifted for a moment away from these intrinsic issues, might the fear be that the discipline could be overrun by the rabble of the distracted and anarchic?

By the early 80s, with these articles and letters on monochrome in circulation, we can see how artists step in and out of the discourse, finding a way to influence what they understand as the center and periphery of discussions. No one painter or writer appears to have initiated the discourse—that may have come more from the studio discussions of the Radical Painters, the name they assumed at an early stage. Hafif publishes one of the first magazine accounts, but that is not the origin of the discussions. Reviewing Foucault's questioning of conventional definitions of the author's presence we may wonder at the self-effacing enacted by these artists in a collective withdrawal under a Stoic surrender to materials and procedures. "How, under what conditions, and in what forms can something like a subject appear in the order of discourse? What place can it occupy in each type of discourse, what functions can it

assume, and by obeying what rules?"<sup>13</sup> Where the voices of a discourse are so readily interchangeable, can we say that at the time of speaking there is anything other than one subject position to be assumed by these painters? Although the obvious differences in their paintings tell otherwise, the same kind of query as Foucault's has to be asked of artists who create operations into which they can disappear so easily while speaking. What does it matter who is painting? And once the paintings are done, what does it matter who is looking?

Although they don't sound so different from one another, many of these remarks come as qualifiers to distinguish and separate the artist-writer's work from the work of their fellows. Is there a grain in the voice of the statement, or in the work (Barthes's "grain" as the voice of singers)? Or do they reveal the strict boundaries of this thinking, of the limitations of debating in a box, where the words and ideas bounce around in a small space?

There's an agreement amongst them, for example, to talk about paintings, processes, and materials as if all these *needed* to be independent, free not just from biography and narrative but from all other things and matter in the world.<sup>14</sup> There's the agreement to engage with a realm for painting bounded by strictly defined properties that are not analogous to events in the world, nor resemble anything existing, other than other paintings. It is as if this realm of pure painting engagement is legitimized by disinterestedness, untainted by worldly concerns. Hafif's remark "The painting I have been talking about is pure painting in the sense that it is not at the service of other needs"<sup>15</sup> is never questioned in the ensuing correspondence in

13. Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," *Foucault Reader*, p118, Random House, 1984

14. An indication of how totalizing was this supposition can be readily seen by comparing these painter positions with that of Byron Kim whose early 1990's monochromes were influenced by Hafif's paintings. Kim selected the color of his paintings according to friends' skin pigmentation. They were monochrome portraits.

15. Marcia Hafif, "Getting on with Painting," *Art in America*, April 1981, p133

11. Phil Sims, *Radical Painting*, Williams College Museum of Art, 1984, p37

12. Günter Umberg, *Radical Painting*, Williams College Museum of Art, 1984, p43



the December issue (although Ratcliff pushes his postmodern critique against this threshold of withdrawal). Kant's claim of disinterest as a key measure of aesthetic experience is really an issue of audience reception. On the side of production, the notion of an art that "is not at the service of other needs" is first explicitly demanded by Hegel at the start of his *Aesthetics*. Art should not be engaged in resolving the world's irreconcilabilities, he writes, but should only present that world for view, disinterestedly. To engage with those problems is to contaminate the work's qualities with personal interests external to the properties of painting. Art's autonomy, negotiated through experiments with form and idea, is defended in the name of purity. Obviously the question of art's purpose in a world on which it seems to have little impact provokes the most productive aesthetic debates for a century and a half after Hegel.

Invariably left out of these statements is the question of what this thing is that is looked at, and what feelings are provoked, or experienced, once the work is made. And how the meaning changes according to location and context. The statements about procedures bounce around the box without ever exiting. Should we assume then that the debaters knew each other so well that the slightest inflection of language was interpretable as indication of a change in a painting's agency and meaning? They all seem to participate in an agreed platform for discussion, upon which the paintings are assumed to reside. We could summarize the discussion platform in this way: materials have inherent properties that define how they can be used; by using them in the ways inherent to them, the potential of those materials can be fully realized; the painting embodies how an individual artist has decided to address those inherent properties; we should not impose demands on those materials that are external to their properties or the painting will betray its purpose and the artist will betray his/her individuality; since the painting has been made in conditions strictly independent of the external world, it should not be evaluated with criteria external to it; we should not draw analogies between the appearance of the painting and the external world since that inappropriately ties those properties to unrelated ideas and imagery.





This seems to comply with one side of the comparison drawn between modern and contemporary paradigms by Mario Perniola as he summarizes a discussion of Nathalie Heinich's. "For the modern paradigm, the artistic value resides in the work and all that is external to it is added to the intrinsic value of the work. Whereas in the contemporary paradigm, the artistic value resides in the combination of connections (discourses, actions, grids, situations and sense affects) established around or starting from an object, which is only an occasion, a pretext, or a point of transition."<sup>16</sup> However, such archetypes bleed into one another, can be reinterpreted, or read against type. If these *Glaze Paintings* of Hafif's could loosen their moorings to what extent would they infect Perniola's contemporary paradigm?

On the left as you entered the gallery: *Viridian*, color hovering with the texture of flour, clotting across the surface; *Indian Yellow*, flat-looking color, withdrawn yet resplendent, an interiority, a glowing interior, pulling back into itself; *Cobalt Blue*, a denim patch, threadbare, thin color; *Indigo*, opaque, screen-like, mute and dense, at first looking smoke-black, then revealing a steel-blue cast; *Cobalt Violet*, curtain of color, sheer, striated like rain on a windscreen; *Alizarin Crimson*, a floating surface of color, glowing while losing its spatial position, unreachable, coalescing patches of color that float over the ground; *Vermilion*, waxy, flatter than the other colors, silk-like; *Scheveningen Medium Yellow*, pushing out, spatially unfixed, as if sanded wood, the color effect seemingly in front of the plane of the canvas.

If an exhibition of Hafif's like U-turn's *Glaze Paintings* can be taken as one work in the way it holds back change, then the monochromes might function like the crystalline flowers in J.G. Ballard's "The Garden of Time," a fantasy on the privilege and precariousness of culture at any moment: "At the peak of each stem was the time flower, the size of a goblet, the opaque outer petals enclosing the crystal heart. Their diamond brilliance contained a thousand facets, the crystal seeming to drain the air of its light and motion. As the flowers swayed slightly in the evening air, they

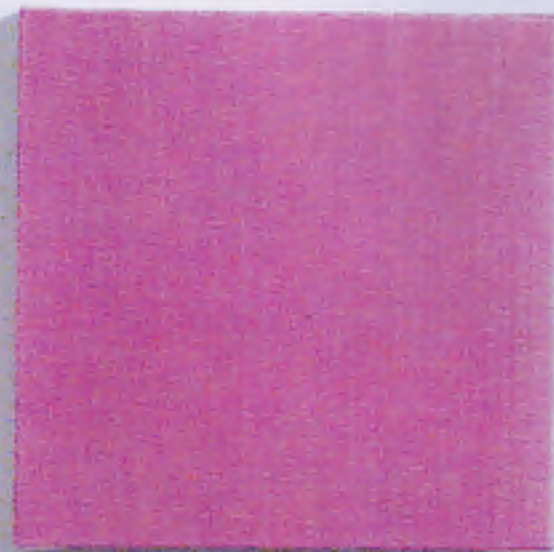
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16. Mario Perniola, *Art and its Shadow*, p47, New York, Continuum, 2004











glowed like flame-tipped spears."<sup>17</sup> By selectively picking these flowers Count Axel and his wife are able to delay the moment when an anarchic horde invades their villa. When the last flower is plucked the house is overrun, the books in the library destroyed and the paintings slashed.

With these paintings of Hafif's, unquestionably time stops as there is no diachronic temporality to this work, no sequence of one after another, no evidence of stages within the painting of any one piece, and no before or after since there is no story being told, no image to be read with a start and finish, beginning and end. The painter works to stall time but by escaping from the conditions that pertain to the making of most other paintings Hafif pushes her paintings away so that they stand in their own future present. The stillness that is the world of the paintings is the present held still so that it is also the paintings' future. "It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity; as she had already felt about something different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures."<sup>18</sup>

In fiction like Virginia Woolf's, material is the path towards better memory, to the truth about the past. In real life, in "real" painting isn't it just the opposite? Isn't it the case that material progressively erases memory by disengaging subjective responses, voluntary or involuntary, from the practice, the application, of materials? In *To the Lighthouse* Woolf has Lily Briscoe retrieving the intensity of memories only as she moves material around on her painting. Marcel Proust's involuntary memory is

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17. J.G. Ballard, "The Garden of Time," *The Best Short Stories of J.G. Ballard*, New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1995, p142

18. Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*



provoked by the madeleine cake dipped in tea, by the conjoined taste of two materials. But here in U-turn, in real life, Hafif's selection of pure pigments, unmixed, uninflected by signifying brushstrokes, forces association and memory aside.

Let's return to that feeling of one's irrelevance, that until *you* arrived the paintings had been doing fine on their own. Left to themselves, had they formed a group, glowing across the room to one another in that creepy telepathic way that we've long suspected of monochromes? They are uncanny of course, not exactly dead, but like dead things that remind us of the living. Zombie paintings—familiar but strange—their self-containment a sign of what would pass for thought if anthropomorphized. Speaking of which, did you notice how Hafif had asked for the 8 paintings to be hung at head height? At twenty by twenty inches they approximated head size, and so faced outwards, looking through you, if not at each other, then at nothing in particular. Their sentience was not *looking* exactly, not human in that way; more an incomprehensible communication.

To say "look" would exaggerate, in the manner it's so easy to do with these small paintings. Is it more that they invite one to look at them in advance of returning a look that in fact is never given? Not withheld as such, just never available in the first place. Lacan's "little story" of remaining unseen by a glittering sardine can, floating off the fishing boat in which he used to hitch a ride, alludes to this peculiar experience. Lacan admits that he was an intellectual free to move amongst diverse milieus, hanging out with fishermen tied for life to their dangerous work: "And Petit-Jean said to me— *You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!*"<sup>19</sup> Lacan's gaze and the look of the can slide past one another but never entangle. Ultimately there is no subject place for the relatively privileged Lacan amongst the events of that fishing world. If there are objects in the world that are meant not to see us as we are at that moment, is it possible to make paintings so outside our world

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19. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, "The Line And Light," p95, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978





that they will never see anyone?

So the eight monochrome paintings are hung in a row at eye level, uncannily resembling the heads of decapitated soldiers. Like the military avant-garde, the paintings become the line of assault troops waiting for the moment to sacrifice themselves in battle, living to die in the manner they are designed to do. Freud's bleak conclusion to his analysis of the instincts that "What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion"<sup>20</sup> underscores this most radical aspect of Hafif's paintings that establish a sphere of presentness that succeeds in sharing nothing at all with our own organism and does not even see us.

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20. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p47, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1961







Marcia Hafif  
*Glaze Paintings*

Exhibition Checklist

*Viridian*

(Pages 6, 8, 12, 32)

*Indian Yellow*

(Pages 7, 11, 13, 32)

*Cobalt Blue*

(Pages 2, 16, 18)

*Indigo*

(Pages 1, 20, 22)

*Cobalt Violet*

(Pages 21, 23, 24)

*Alizarin Crimson*

(Pages 21, 26, 28)

*Vermilion*

(Pages 21, 30)

*Scheveningen Medium Yellow*

(Pages 21, 31)

\*all paintings oil on canvas

Essay by Mark Harris

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