

Helen Miranda Wilson

by John Yau

In 2005, Helen Miranda Wilson, who has been celebrated for her small, highly detailed paintings of sky, landscape, still-life, and personal moments, began showing geometric abstractions, apparently having left representation behind. Wilson called them “calendar paintings;” they were grids of meticulously painted squares whose edges tilted ever so slightly, like blocks a child places on top of each other. They seemed to suggest Americana, particularly patchwork quilts and folk art, as a source. In her current show, she has moved far beyond those associations, and, in the process, achieved something quite radical. For just when nearly everyone thought that nothing more could be done with stripes laid down, one after another, and that various practitioners seemed determined to nudge geometric abstraction into a state of deep hibernation that I would characterize as minute variations on non-spatial stasis, Helen Miranda Wilson lets us know that we might have gotten it all wrong. As Wilson’s recent luminous paintings make clear, geometric painting doesn’t have to be large, static, non-spatial, and hard-edged. It doesn’t have to evoke the spiritual, continue the paradigm of paint-as-paint, or be painterly. It can do something altogether different: it can be intimately scaled, personal and impersonal, optically raucous and biting colorful. It can even be dizzying, as if you are standing on a high-speed whirligig, and the world is a bunch of feathery-edged bands of color flying by. And the colors glow, seemingly both solid and transparent.

Wilson paints on wood panels, none of which are bigger than 20 × 16 inches (a size Thomas Nozkowski worked in for years, and near the size that Tomma Abt currently works in, suggesting that small scaled works might finally be taken seriously). The bands of paint are smooth, meticulously so, with some of the edges extending into the adjacent bands, like cilia. The palette seems to follow no discernible order. Rather the paintings consist of aggregates of related tones interspersed among various colors. Wilson seems to lean toward hothouse and tropical colors—from sharp reds to pale pinks, deep blues to milky blues, a range of chartreuses (I had never thought about the fact that there are so many), different yellows, violets, with some browns, grays, blacks, and whites. Deep orange seems the only color that is in short supply.

Wilson’s stripes don’t sit contentedly within their borders; they push against the painting’s physical edges, like helium expanding a balloon’s skin to its absolute limits. Their relentless freneticism strikes me as very urban, and it goes against the received view that the culmination of geometric abstraction was the moment when, in his “black” paintings, Frank Stella used the stripe as a modular unit to “empty out” painting. In hindsight, and this is something that many abstract painters have continued to make apparent, Stella didn’t bring painting to an end. (Maybe curators will open their eyes one day, instead of committing themselves to the next thing in packaging.)

In paintings such as “He and I” (2007) and “Corridor” (2007), Wilson divides the painting into two or three stacks of stripes, the colors colliding against each other. In “He and I,” the bars making up each side are not aligned with their counterpart, causing everything to continually shift. Also, the division varies, with some groupings of the bars taking up more space than their corresponding groups. This inequality conveys a continual tension. It is an abstract portrait, at once deeply personal and completely non-anecdotal. In “Corridor” Wilson divides the painting into three vertical stacks. Despite the sudden changes in color, the width of the bars are the same all the way across, except in one place near the bottom. In addition, Wilson uses two different green bars that extend from side to side, dividing the vertical stacks into three distinct groupings. These decisions structure the paint plane, so that it is hard to see it all at once. Wilson’s jumpy paintings don’t let the viewer relax, and demand an active engagement.

In these paintings Wilson moves into a territory that is all her own. The paintings are color sensations in which a complex range of feelings and possible readings are evoked. It used to be, or so some people claim, that when a painter did something new and different, others would notice it. Except in the case of very few artists, this hasn’t been the case in years. Wilson doesn’t care, and that is to her credit. She has persistently gone her own way for nearly forty years, and never made a single concession to the marketplace or to stylistic trends. That, to me, is heroic.