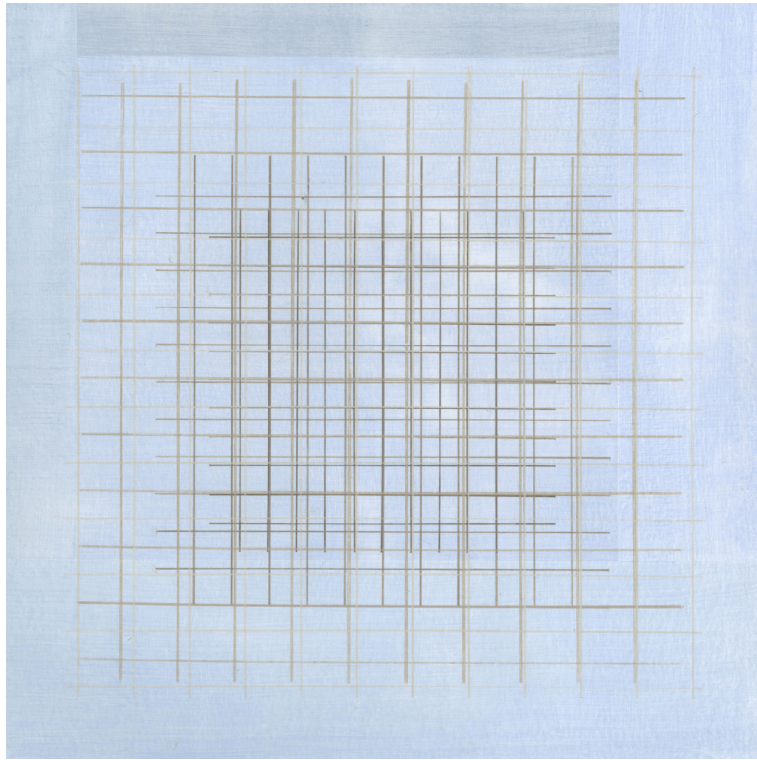


Two Coats of Paint

BETSY KAUFMAN: THE MORE YOU SEE

by Jacob Cartwright | December 4, 2025

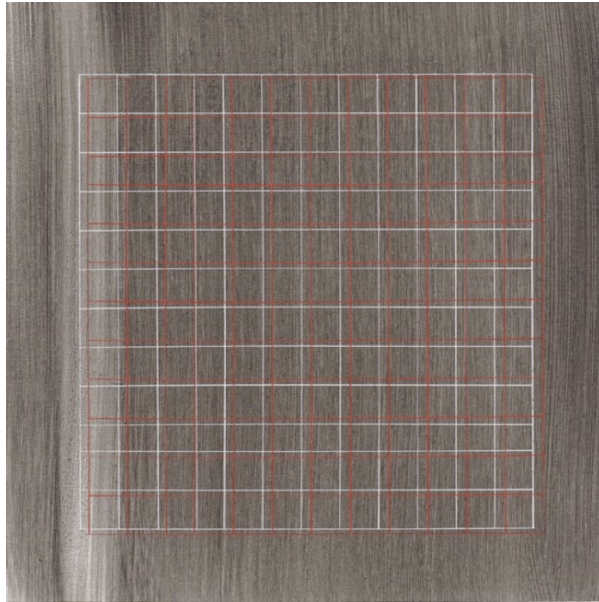


Betsy Kaufman, #88, 2017, acrylic on paper, 12 × 12 inches.

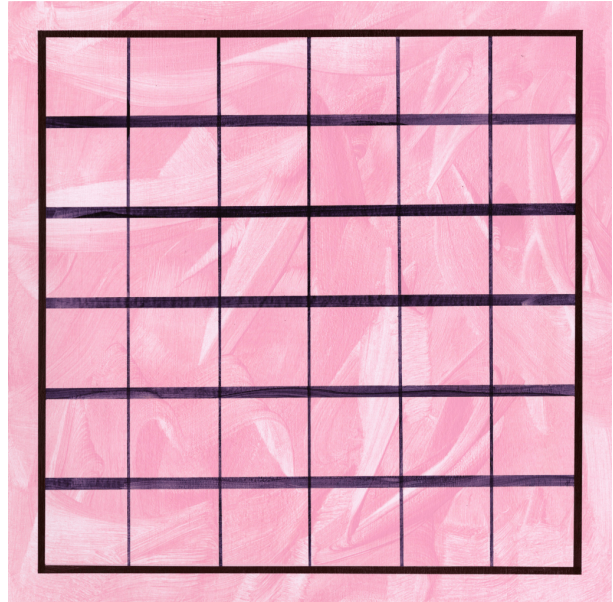
At first blush, Betsy Kaufman's self-titled show at Bookstein Projects, a concise survey of work made from 2008 to 2025, seems simply to present a handsomely cerebral group of paintings and drawings. In time, it becomes clear that the work smuggles in something more. Kaufman's output is a kind of two-sided coin that can oscillate between her embrace of bold, saturated color and strategies of stark reduction. While her juicy chromatic washes are on full display in some pieces, the curation steers the show's overall focus towards her reductive sensibilities. That well-judged decision affords the

compelling revelation that her most withholding pieces are, paradoxically, the lushest—works that demand close attention and reward it by showing precisely what focused looking can yield.

Many paintings in the show are built up from greenish grey, chocolate brown, or color fields that have been whitewashed to various degrees of oblivion. These are the foundations for linework in a similarly muted color key. The grid, that old modernist stalwart, is abundantly present, framed within the image area in a way that evokes its utilitarian uses as a guide for observational drawing or photography. All of this seems smart, if dry, upon first impression. But you quickly notice that Kaufman's sensitivity to the weight of line rises to a poetic level. Her linear elements are so delicate that technique is beyond ready perception, so that they read as pure vectors of paint. This quality allows her work to drift back and forth between painting and drawing, and sometimes to rest at a productive equipoise between the two.



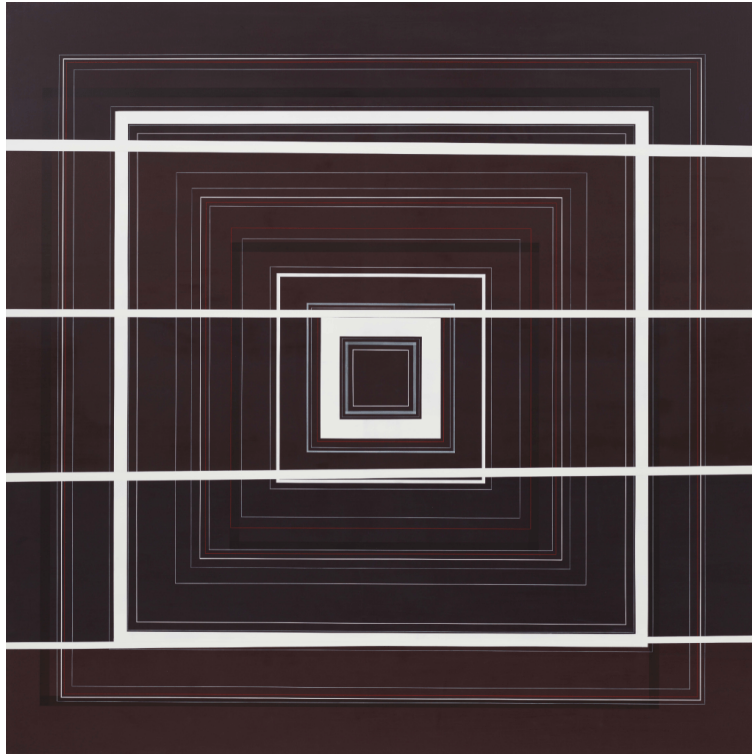
Left: Betsy Kaufman, #7, 2016, acrylic on paper, 8 × 8 inches.



Right: Betsy Kaufman, #66, 2017, acrylic on paper, 12 × 12 inches.

The combination of austere and regimented linework, restrained color, and square-ish formats unavoidably brings Agnes Martin to mind. The work doesn't suffer from this association, which is no small feat given Martin's gift for wringing so much more presence from humble elements than other artists using similarly reductive devices (her friend Richard Tuttle being a notable exception). Kaufman seems perfectly comfortable with the connection and, more importantly, to have absorbed and fully digested the lessons in Martin's work. If the work flirts with homage, it ultimately goes its own way.

Key to Kaufman's voice is her deftness at playing precision against imprecision, and the curation succeeds in teasing this out and registering its full implications. Some works are grounded quite overtly in a misregistration of elements, resembling misprints from the paper-based days of mass media. She savors the resulting color overlays. In the works on paper, grids are dropped one upon the other to create a buzzy frisson. It's a masterclass in getting a lot from a little. In *Cut Square* – the large work which greets you upon entry – ostensibly parallel lines occasionally meander in ways that don't feel entirely intentional. This telling feature, which reveals itself slowly, is central to the territory that she stakes out. Sometimes the works are assiduously exact, at other times they contain a surprising blend of precision and nonchalance, and the place where each work lands on this spectrum doesn't seem entirely premeditated. The way that these qualities don't exist in equal proportion in each piece is an asset, which allows these rigorous works to also feel spontaneous and not entirely predictable.

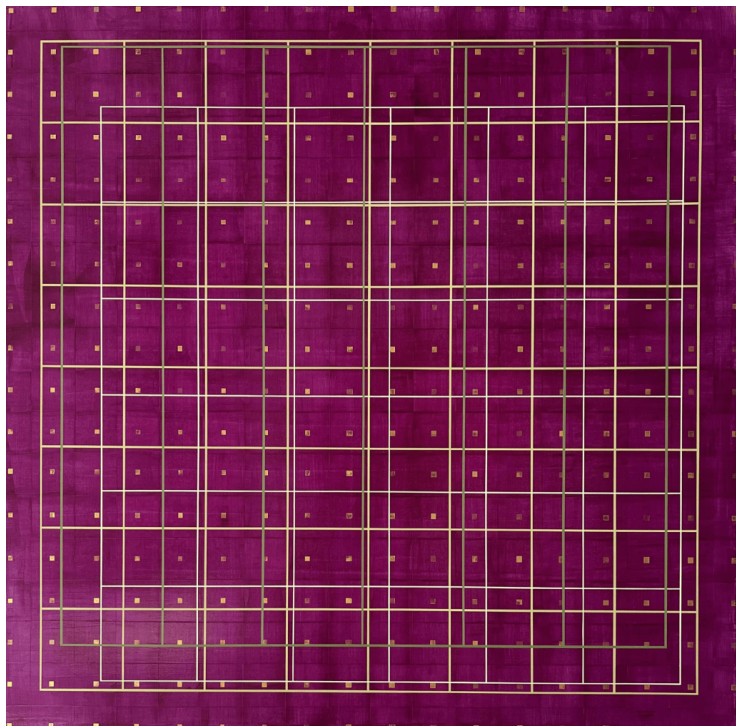


Betsy Kaufman, *Cut Square*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 60 × 60 inches.

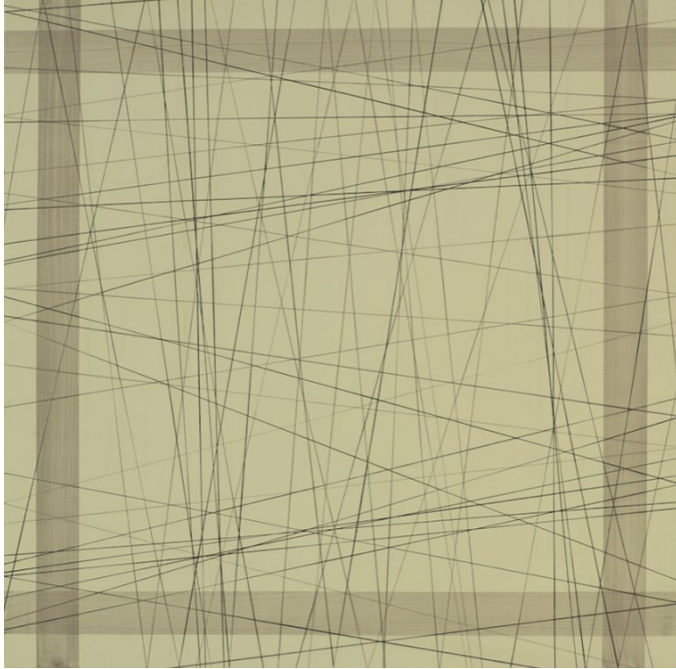
smooth and buttery base for the paintings, but she also leaves the frizzy edges of paint that the process creates around the perimeter. Likewise, while she executes linear elements with airless technique, she just as often leaves brushy lines and scrubby striations in the work: welcome evidence of her tools and materials.

The metallic paint that appears in certain works seems to gesture not toward blue-blooded filigree, but instead toward the monastic use of gold leaf in illuminated manuscripts, or perhaps the copper and gold pathways of circuit boards. And although there's a stately quality to Kaufman's craftsmanship that sits comfortably in a wood-floored Upper East Side gallery, it has little to do with signaling wealth or class; after all, there are far more

It's a particular kind of pleasure to contemplate works that initially seem brainy and a little starchy but then open up with their own kind of sensuality. If Martin is the easy link, François Morellet is a close cousin. Kaufman isn't as procedural as Morellet, but they share the stratagem of playing rigor against chance, and saturation against starkness, yielding outcomes that are more intoxicating than they seem like they ought to be. The semi-secret ingredient of this slow-burning warmth is Kaufman's love of her materials. The grounds are troweled on, which creates a



Betsy Kaufman, *In My Eyes*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 52 × 52 inches.



Betsy Kaufman, *Untitled (Crosshatch on E.C. Green)*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 12 x 12 inches.

expensive artworks by marquee names in the neighborhood, Julian Schnabel's plate paintings being right next door. Rather, Kaufman's work aligns with a slower-moving aspect of New York, which knows its history and feels no need to advertise itself.

"Betsy Kaufman," Bookstein Projects, 39 East 78th Street, 4th Floor, New York, NY. Through December 19, 2025.

About the author: Jacob Cartwright is an NYC-based painter and independent curator who writes about art.

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