

MARION MEYER

CONTEMPORARY
ART

Robert Mah

OPEN SPACES/PRIMARY COLORS

Paintings, 2009

“Painting is about the beauty of space and the power of containment.” -Sam Francis

The leap from a monochromatic image to a vividly colored one has always opened eyes—whether it was photographs on the front cover of newspapers blooming into color or motion pictures (most famously in *The Wizard of Oz*) taking us from a Black & White monotone into the Technicolor wonders of an imaginary world.

To encounter Robert Mah’s most recent canvases in this exhibition, *Open Spaces/Primary Colors*, is to experience this leap. Even for those who didn’t see his 2007 show, *The Spontaneous Process*, the bold, primary colors that splash across his newest canvases immediately grab the eye. But for those who are familiar with those elegant, seemingly restrained works, the sight of these colors is explosive.

Not just because of their unabashed use of color—at first glance it would seem as if the artist was finally granted permission to use bright yellows and gleaming reds—but also because of the freedom of the brushwork. Initially it looks as if the careful, minimalist edges of his earlier paintings have been wildly abandoned, like a chamber quartet suddenly breaking into rock and roll. But when one looks closer at these canvases—at the pools of color, the varied textures and subtle restraint—instead of a radical departure or shift, Robert Mah’s new collection represents simply a natural progression.

The two earliest paintings in this collection, *Dancing Polymers* and *In Depth*, share a connection to his previous exhibition. Like those works, they display a more controlled, muted palette: black paint on a white canvas, with only a few similar-hued shades of blue and gray. *In Depth* resembles most those works, as it feels the most composed, the most formal. With *Dancing Polymers* we see the relaxed, more lyrical brushwork, but still the almost monochromatic palette.

As it turns out, the subsequent color canvases all started out this way: the first paint to touch the surface is black. But soon, the vision shifts; Mah sees color and decides to “just go for it; let it happen.”

It does.

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Pouring the paint onto the canvas and then using the sweep of his brush to let more of the paint drip onto the surface in lyrical arcs and seemingly random dots, the red, green, yellow and blue takes form.

There is a performative aspect to these works—Mah painted them standing upright with the canvas horizontally on the floor. But these are not simply Jackson Pollock-esque action paintings. His abstract interplay of color and white spaces is more in the vein of Sam Francis, an artist whose work could look improvisational, even if his process was methodical and rigorous

Mah's bright colors and playful brushwork suggests spontaneity; however, to look closer into the canvases is to see the same precision, the same surety of composition that exists in his previous landscapes (*Above the Tree Line* or *Beyond the Himalayas*) as well as his abstract portraits (*Spatial Intelligence* or *Blue Forecast*).

There is a natural-ness to these new canvases, as if their patterns and shapes were seen under a microscope, at the same time that they seem to have been released, or “let go” from Mah's brush, like a butterfly freed from its pupa. However this feeling of spontaneity, just like the leap from black and white to color, is not entirely unplanned. It is the result of an artist's conscious (or at least subconscious) choices. The fact that the two canvases that make up the diptych titled *Heliotrope I* appear linked (and can also appear linked when reversed) is the result of careful composition both before the paint is poured and afterwards, when Mah steps back and uses white paint (often hard to spot until you look closer) to “erase” some of the color. Looking at *Heliotrope I*, we *feel* this structure, but what we *see* is the dynamism and motion.

During his tenure as a professor of microbiology at UCLA, Robert Mah saw the beauty of the world at the cellular level—he also no doubt saw how beauty and function interacted together. In this work, we see an artist who knows how to render a sense of organic grace on canvas; and with his artistic training and compositional instinct, he also takes control of the paint to subtly shift, focus, and clarify the forms our eye sees. The colors are what dazzle us at first, but it's the carefully constructed rhythms and sense of symmetry Mah orchestrates that keep us mesmerized.

James C. Taylor