

The starting point for the paintings in Linda Geary's exhibition *Inside Out* is an ongoing series of collages that the artist began making in 2008. At the time she viewed the collages as an antidote to a lull in her painting activity. They derive from recycling a body of watercolors that she discarded (the successful ones in that series were shown at Rena Bransten Gallery in 2006). The daily repurposing of these remnants (randomly selected from a stack in her studio) as both supports and materials for the collages became a source of creativity and inspiration, spurring new ideas about placement and color. Snippets of swatches from a separate "archive" of hand-painted washes of watercolor amplified her palette, allowing her to add depth to the compositions and to further test color relationships. Her physical approach to the process was gestural and intuitive, like her work in other media; she dispersed her materials as widely as possible over the floor of her studio in order to emphasize the experience of selection and placement.

Although Geary doesn't make drawings or sketches, she often works on parallel series such as these, and the almost purely technical and associative processes that mark their generation equal a narrative stream of consciousness. The improvised color choices (from loose groups of warm or cool tones), the rapid decoupage of the watercolors, and the energetic, accelerated process of assembly are not necessarily evident in the balanced, controlled forms of the final collages. Their pulsing concentrations of color, however, and their often-multidirectional orientation hint that they are informed by sensibility rather than sense.



Collage #53, 2010, mixed media on paper, 15 x 11 in.

The speedy (she completes a collage in less than an hour) and repetitive aspects of the project prompted instinctive responses, which Geary found so compelling that she decided to analyze them by replicating the collages in paint on canvas. On view here, then, are not only six of her collage works but also six of their painted representations. This is the first time Geary has integrated a “side” body of work into her primary practice, and it is also her first foray into painting from observation.

To neutralize some of the more obvious differences induced by the shift in medium Geary diluted her paints with linseed oil and turpenoid, which ensured that the surfaces of the canvases would remain matte. Using a loaded brush to delineate her subject on canvas added an element of constraint missing from the instinctive creation of her original watercolors. The oil paint’s resolute inertia further hampered a literal recreation of the smaller compositions. However, wrestling with her materials fuels Geary’s creative

process, and here her frustrated attempts to emulate certain effects of the watercolor on paper—washes, drips, and frottage, for example—have generated a new vocabulary. Translucency has given way to mottled diversity and subtle hues. Solid planes of color enhance the illusion of layering. Meandering tendrils of water drips have for the most part been eliminated, or marshaled into straight lines.

Ad Reinhardt's oft-cited reference to the content of abstract painting as residing "not in a subject matter or story but in the actual painting activity"¹ is borne out by Geary's process. She tends to select media based on her own unfamiliarity with their physical properties and works with them until she masters them, finding purpose in confronting spray paint, for example, or resin. The relationship between self-imposed resistance (or constraint) and creativity in this particular series of large format paintings is catalyzed by, for example, her use of tape and X-acto knives to delineate forms on the canvas. The tape, often applied to more than one area at a time, masks the picture plane, making it hard to gauge the overall direction in which the work is developing.

Exceeding the parameters of representation, these paintings should be understood as translations. As huge enlargements of the earlier compositions, the referential signs and actual collage elements to which they refer are intentionally made obvious, or only slightly abstracted. However it is in the slippage between subject and referent that the paintings exercise their greatest power. Now etiolated and engorged, the forms butt up against each other, overlap, and squeeze against their precision-taped perimeters. The friction between them animates the picture plane. The unlikely color juxtapositions vibrate, straining the confines of the two-dimensional surface. Occasionally, as in the verdantly luminous *Runaround*, they display emotive capabilities that align with Wassily Kandinsky's convictions about the close relationships among color, music, and spirituality.

That these paintings have a psychological dimension is underscored by their titles. While the collages are numbered serially (for example *Collage #53*), the titles of the works on canvas refer to various states and speeds of physical and psychological engagement. To quote Bob Nickas: "Any full 'reading' of an abstract painting must include the reading and negotiation of the title, if there is one. Titles, as we know, are not merely the names of things. Titles go directly to intention."² Thus *Adrenaline* conjures velocity, and a certain fear or excitement or pressure. The oscillating motion implied by *Boomerang* also invokes indecision. *Camouflage* is related to disguise, referring perhaps to the emotions



Palette Painting for Freeze Tag,
2010, oil on wood panel,
11 x 9 in.

poured out on the canvas but obscured by the swirling lines and shapes. The game of *Freeze Tag* relies on stealth and speed; the play of the two, and the knowledge of when to stop, are integral to the process of making the paintings.

Geary herself tends to be highly active: taping, tearing, cutting, mixing paints, lifting, moving, stepping back and forth, et cetera. Constantly on the move around her studio, she leaves a trail of piles of masking tape, blobs of paint, and plastic cups of mixed oil colors. She refers in conversation to the consequent "stickiness" of her immediate environment. Her expression of movement through gesture marks her as a direct descendant of Jackson Pollock. The size of her canvases ensures a full repertoire of motions, though the performative element stops one step short of Yves Klein's paint-covered models being dragged across the canvas. By extension, then, the titles describe both the vigorous

process and the psychology of the artist. They evoke doubt, questioning, and deliberate reversals, but always with a view to moving forward.

Bearing no formal resemblance to either the collages or the works on canvas, the palette paintings are best understood as something like color keys for, or DNA blueprints of, the works on canvas. As the titles attest (for example, *Palette for Adrenaline*), their concentrations of color were achieved by Geary haphazardly resting her brushes on their surfaces when painting the collage derivatives. Their viable life as individual works, however, is less comprehensible. In a previous existence, the supports functioned as studies of complementary colors, but were rejected by the artist for their lack of animation. Now resuscitated by bright dollops of oil paint, they achieve a formal quality at odds with their random creation, and advertise a relationship to the larger works that remains elusive, in the way of afterimages.

These three bodies of work document the most recent developments in Geary's ongoing inquiry into color and form. They attest to the numerous possibilities at play in her exploration. Seen together they clarify the artist's intentions and process at the same time creating an almost hallucinatory color reverberation. In surrendering to their effect, we are reminded that painting exists to be experienced.

LEIGH MARKOPOULOS is Chair of the MA Program in Curatorial Practice at California College of the Arts, San Francisco

NOTES

1. *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose, (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991): 49.
2. Bob Nickas, introduction to *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting* (London: Phaidon, 2009): 5.