

## Maps to Get Lost By

by Jaimie Baron

**H**uman beings have an exceptional propensity for pattern recognition: making connections between like things, distinguishing cause and effect. We are also gifted with the ability to create our own patterns, such as those of language and mathematics, that allow us to communicate with one another across space and time. Yet, inevitably, we become trapped within these patterns of our own invention, often mistaking them for what is, for all that can be. Indeed, the recognition of the conceptual cages we have built for ourselves propels some artists to seek their own languages of expression, that make room for articulations disallowed or simply inaccessible within normative discourse.

Linda Geary's language of painting is built from unique coalescences of color, shape, and texture. She creates multiple, distinct visual objects that function like proto-linguistic units within the larger structure of each painting. As in language proper, the conversation that occurs between and among the visual "semes" is just as important as their individual identities. In her large-scale paintings, each seme has its own integrity, but the energetic power of the piece arises from their interaction, the unexpected resonances between seemingly unrelated fragments. What one finds in these cryptic, colorful messages, however, is not meaning *per se* but, rather, a conveyed feeling, a vibration between elements that come together like a newly discovered musical chord, a combination outside accepted patterns that is—nevertheless—beautiful.

At the same time, her paintings are cartographies, maps not of objective space but of what Henri Lefebvre named "representational space" in *The Production of Space* (1974), the spaces we live with our bodies. Some of the paintings remind me of maps drawn by my seven-year-old young son: aerial views that feel right rather than corresponding to measured physical coordinates. Yet, in contrast to most modern maps, there are few straight lines in Geary's work. If these are read as cities viewed from above, they have been constructed according to a logic other than capitalist efficiency. In general, maps offer the viewer a (false) sense of coherence and power, but these are not maps of omniscience or domination. They are maps to get lost by.

In fact, Geary's paintings repel systemization. Beyond resisting industrial logic, Geary's paintings also reject the dominant aesthetic logic of the digital era, based entirely around the one shape: the square. Although we rarely perceive it on a conscious level, most humans now

spend many hours a day looking at amalgamations of pixels, millions and millions of tiny squares that masquerade as images. Here, however, the tyranny of the right angle is loosened, new pathways of experience opening beyond. At the same time, there is frequently an oscillation between figure and ground, between what reads as positive and negative space. In *Where the Hummingbirds*, for instance, this perceptual instability activates the visual semes, giving the painting a sense of quivering movement. Moreover, scale is indeterminate. Although the shapes in *Everywhere, Everywhere* could be read like strange atolls and peninsulas viewed from far above the Earth, they could also be microscopic cells, the parts of which—mitochondria and other mysterious organelles—are in, around, and of us. These bright, massive, and perceptually overwhelming paintings, then, are liberating in a very deep sense, freeing us for a moment from existing systems of signification that masquerade as reality.

Moreover, Geary's work simultaneously resists systemization by relying in part on uncontrollable elements to constitute its signs. The materials of the paintings themselves introduce aleatory aspects. Geary uses a combination of gouache, acrylic, flashe, and oil paint and allows them to mix and overlap in unpredictable ways. Many of the paintings include glued-on scraps of other canvases, paintings that Geary decided to cut up into rough shapes and reframe within another composition. Through seemingly impulsive gestures of cutting and gluing, she adds a sense of randomness, of foundness, of relinquishing control to allow the Real to seep in at the edges.

The smaller works on paper, selections from Geary's *Windowpane* series, feel like letters sent between intimates, pen pals who exchange maps instead of written missives. Like the large paintings, they articulate an alternative structure of representation, but they communicate in a different tongue. These are palimpsests; they look like one map laid atop another atop another. Painted on unbound book paper into which the paints bleed as they please, they remind me of archaeological maps that mark different architectural strata, each representing a distinct era of inhabitation or even civilization. The rectangles, circles, and blots in *Sitting Down Close*, for instance, could indicate remnants of buildings that once stood. Yet, like the paintings, these are maps without keys, without a legend to tell us the meanings of the markings. We are left trying to read a script without a codex, hovering always on the edge of signification.

In the 1960s, members of the Situationist International would use a map of one city to navigate another urban space, "misusing" cartography in order to defamiliarize everyday spaces, the kind we cease to attend to—or even notice—most of the time. In a sense, by walking around Paris referring to a representation of Amsterdam, they used maps to make themselves lost. Geary's works summon a similar feeling of disorientation. Although being lost has often been framed negatively, here it is a joyous release from the internalized structures that bind.