

## HYPERALLERGIC

# The Enigmatic Genius of Magalie Guérin's Paintings

In her latest exhibition, what struck me immediately about Guérin's work was that it neither looked like anyone else's nor immediately disclosed its meaning.

John Yau, July 26, 2023



Magalie Guérin, "Untitled (CTG)" (2023), oil on canvas on panel, 30 x 24 inches  
(all images © Magalie Guérin; courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York;  
Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago)

In a 2019 interview with artist Sangram Majumdar, Magalie Guérin stated:

*I don't think of [my paintings] in abstract terms. I think of them as constructions of shapes that exist in the world, even though you can't recognize them. You don't know what they are, but you sense that they ARE. [...] There's gravity. There's a ground. A figure-ground relationship. There's a logical sense of construction.*

Embracing all the possibilities that all-over abstraction supposedly rendered obsolete, Guérin's statement resonated with something that Thomas Nozkowski said to me in an interview in 2010, when I asked him if his paintings came from personal experience:

*Yes, but taking that idea in the broadest possible way. Events, things, ideas — anything. Objects and places in the visual continuum, sure, but also from other arts and abstract systems.*

Both Guérin and Nozkowski are abstract artists who explore a subjective space that the latter helped open up, starting in the mid-1970s, when Conceptual art superseded painting. It is a direction in abstraction that has been largely overlooked because the critical narrative of 20th-century abstraction that has dominated Western art history focuses on the pursuit of objectivity, with an emphasis on external structures, such as the grid, two-dimensionality, paint as paint, and post-easel scale. Working from memory, Nozkowski undermined these measures of objectivity with skewed grids and irregular geometric shapes drawn from the landscape or things he experienced or read about.

This is what links Guérin and Nozkowski in my mind. After visiting the exhibition *Magalie Guérin: some mondegreens* at Sikkema Jenkins, I feel that Guérin, born in 1973, is one of the best abstract artists of her generation. I had seen a couple of her paintings in a group show in the summer of 2022, when we were colleagues briefly at the Ox-Bow School of Art. When I learned that she had earned her MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I wondered what her connection was to artists such as Julia Fish, Miyoko Ito, and Barbara Rossi — abstract painters living and working in Chicago who belong to no group and are not connected to any trends or styles. What struck me immediately about Guérin's work was that it neither looked like anyone else's nor immediately disclosed its meaning.

While I don't think there is any direct influence, I do sense a commonality among these artists, as well as Nozkowski, in which the evocative possibilities of paint are explored in the service of subjective, everyday experience. The youngest of these artists, Guérin is interested in the line between painting and drawing, between the original and the copy, and the space between seeing and comprehending. The gallery's website explains that the exhibition title

*refers to the phonological concept of the mondegreen: an instance of aural misinterpretation, such as the misheard line of lyrics that gives the words or phrases new meaning. Fundamentally, mondegreens arise from the human mind's desire for comprehension, enacting a process through which the unfamiliar becomes recognized, signified, and assimilated into one's understanding of the world.*



Magalie Guérin, "Untitled (EM)" (2023), oil on canvas on panel, 30 x 24 inches





Magalie Guérin, “Untitled (PB)” (2023), oil on canvas on panel, 45 x 36 inches

The exhibition’s 11 paintings, ranging in size from 20 by 16 to 45 by 36 inches, are vertical, suggesting a portrait or a figure. The palette consists of different hues of green, umber, orange, black, white, yellow, and violet. Guérin paints on a topographical surface she has prepared, marked by slight ridges or shallow pathways. In some works, the color conforms to the pathway; in others, she ignores the topography. In “Untitled (CTG)” (2023), she does both. I see this slippage as central to her painting. She wants to develop an ambiguous space where a form may remind you of a head or a vase, but you can’t be sure.

Guérin seems interested in the crucial moment that Philip Guston reached in the mid-1960s, when head-like shapes began to appear in his paintings. However, rather than crossing over into figuration, as Guston did, Guérin depicts a world of gravity and space occupied by shapes that are both specific and unknown. In the exhibition’s paintings, she seems to establish a set of boundaries regarding her palette. She makes no overt reference to sky, so we are not sure where her painted world exists. What the viewer encounters is a self-contained space that does not quite let us in nor keep us out. Art historical

associations, such as Synthetic Cubist still lifes, come to mind and quickly recede. I find this exhilarating. Guérin follows a trajectory whose destination remains unknown until the painting is completed. Attentive to paint's multiple identities and alert to the different textures of things, she applies the paint differently in each area, moving from thin to pasty.

In "Untitled (CC2)" (2023), it is hard not to see a large foot in the painting's lower right-hand corner. This is one of the few instances where I felt I could identify something in Guérin's work, and I was surprised to see it. There is something funny about putting a foot in an abstract painting, and she knows it. The suggestion of handles, rounded forms, carpets, architectural details, and cutout shapes all invite the viewer's speculation. The world arrived at in these paintings is both complete and enigmatic.



Magalie Guérin, "Untitled (CC2)" (2023), oil on canvas on panel, 30 x 24 inches

*Magalie Guérin: some mondegreens* continues at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. (530 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through July 28. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.