

Artforum Review Summer 2015

Portland

Mary Henry

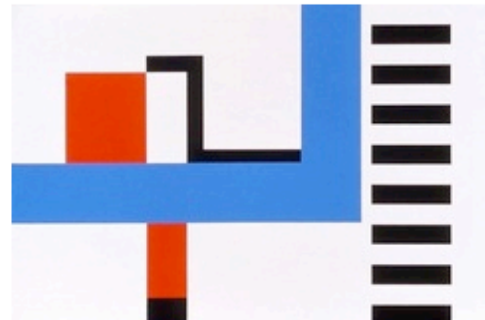
JEFFREY THOMAS FINE ART
2219 NW Raleigh Street
May 13–July 11

Well before her death, the Pacific Northwest-based painter Mary Henry was canonized as a "matriarch of modernism," yet the introspective artist had little interest in the distractions of categorization. Henry was a painter's painter—devoted to daily practice and the slow development of visual concepts over time. This focused exhibition of seven paintings mostly from the late 1980s contains some of the artist's finest abstractions. Deceptively simple in appearance due to their reductive compositions, they're electrified by bright, saturated colors that are limned and punctuated by black and white forms. Henry studied with Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy in Chicago in the 1940s, and his influence is present, but Henry's abstractions are more idiosyncratic and humorous.

In *Option*, 1989, a sequence of vertical black bars at the painting's right edge activates the work with movement. This energy is carried across the canvas by a black zigzag outlining a white rectangle that is mirrored by an identical shape in red and black. Bisecting the two is a thick band of cerulean blue that cuts across the painting and extends upward into a right angle. The center of the piece is nearly impossible to locate, and this asymmetry makes the work appear as diagrammatic as a circuit board.

Henry described the aspirations of her paintings in relationship to organic energies, stating that their focus was "getting rid of all the things that aren't important, to get to the essence of life." She eschewed taping her canvases, instead drawing by hand and laying her colors with traceless sable brushes. This labor-intensive process imbued Henry's geometric abstractions with an uncommon softness and intimacy.

— *Stephanie Snyder*



Mary Henry, *Option*, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 72 x 2".