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Margo Sawyer: *Contemplative Spaces at the Blaffer Gallery*

by Leo Costello -

In *Contemplative Spaces*, Margo Sawyer employs the modernist grid and a language of pure form in an attempt to transform the physical environment of the viewer. To this goal, however, she brings an intuitive and open-ended approach to color, composition and artistic reference.

The show is dominated by the remarkable *Blue*, an installation of painted wooden blocks that covers the entire floor of one room and spills out into the next. While the initial impression is that of an elaborate and fairly regular grid, closer inspection reveals the individual shapes as quite varied, ranging from squares, rectangles and circles to irregular shapes such as molding samples. The range of blue tones is similarly broad, and paint is not applied uniformly. Some pieces are barely covered in thin washes of color that give them a worn, faded appearance while others are deep, matte and lush. Interspersed with blues are shades of white, green, yellow and red, lending the whole work a flickering complexity.

The gridlike arrangement—as well as the rhythm of different shapes, sizes and forms under bright, even lighting quickly brings to mind an aerial view of a sprawling, sunbaked city. The topicality of this reference in Houston is clear, but this arrangement also evokes the typical narrow streets and courtyard dwellings of the Middle East.

As the work bleeds out into an adjacent gallery wrapping around the separating wall, it also mimics the organic growth of urban areas, which persists regardless of the arbitrary boundaries built to contain or control them. Further, because of the alteration of scale Sawyer's references produce, *Blue* does indeed achieve a shift in the viewer's perception of space. Within a relatively small room, we are witness to a vast, detailed world stretching below. Even fixtures such as air vents and electrical outlets are transformed into abstract features within this world—complex and dynamic, but oddly mute and still.

Other works in the exhibition share *Blue*'s visual sophistication but achieve mixed results in relation to the spaces they occupy. Less successful in this regard is *The Kiss*, an undeniably lovely work formed by two grids of colored glass rods hung from the ceiling. *The Kiss*' two lattices intersect but never touch, held together in a taut, tingling balance—a far more subtle metaphor for themes of human contact and separation than its too-obvious title would suggest. Whereas *Blue* bends its surroundings to conform to its scale, *The Kiss* seems a little uncomfortable within its similarly small space. Additionally, the same kinds of fixtures *Blue* so effectively incorporates—signifiers of the world from which Sawyer wishes to remove us—are noticeably separate from the piece, so that the viewer's perception of his or her space remains unchanged by the work of art.



Margo Sawyer, *Blue*, 1989
Paint and silver leaf on wood, glass

Index for Contemplation #4, on the other hand, achieves an alteration of space similar to *Blue*, though in grander metaphysical terms. Approached through a turning hallway, the installation opens up before the viewer on the far wall of a large room and transforms the windowless room into a kind of color-filled inner sanctum. The structure itself—with its colored shapes, empty gaps and additive process—recalls constructions of children's building blocks. It also undoubtedly makes reference to the abstractions of Piet Mondrian. But in place of the Dutch painter's austere, classical severity, Sawyer substitutes an unabashed love of rich, varied colors, an intuitive arrangement of forms and an openness to the viewer's associative capacity. To the right of the installation, for instance, the blocks rise, abruptly drop to the floor and then rise again. The resulting shape is reminiscent of a doorframe, suggesting that the sanctum created by the work of art is not so much a destination as an opening into another realm.

To get to Contemplative Spaces, one must first walk through Daniela Rossell's *Ricas y Famosas*. This is to Sawyer's benefit; ascending the stairs to her installation after seeing the numbingly aggressive materiality in Rossell's photographs feels very much like entering a different plane of existence. From there, the deceptive complexity of Sawyer's work gradually reveals itself to the viewer. The artist first prompts then rewards us for leaving behind the speed and unreflectiveness of everyday life to immerse ourselves in a slow, rhythmic process of viewing and thinking.