

“AS SMALL AS A WORLD AND AS LARGE AS ALONE”

PENELOPE JONES' STRIPPED-DOWN ABSTRACT VISIONS

These words from E.E. Cummings's "Maggie and Milly and Molly and May" could be used to describe Penelope Jones' oil paintings on panel and precision-cut paper collages which are anti-heroic in scale, and yet her stripped-down abstract visions, often no taller than her outstretched hand, could easily fell a Goliath.

If Jones' recent paintings in oil and gouache come from the heart, the compressed collages of her "Border Series" spring from the head. Jones' decades of teaching painting and drawing at Bates College lend authority and grace to her intimate compositions and carefully orchestrated color relationships. Warm and cool tones vibrate in arresting tension, while pure hues sing out against more muted shades. Subtle patterns of variation in value and texture repeatedly delight the eye.

Paper (often affixed to a wood panel), is Jones' silent partner. Fibrous and resilient, it responds to the touch, absorbing wet media and withstanding repeated wiping, scoring and abrasion.

Jones lays down her first marks as transparent washes and loose gestural strokes, and then builds up and sweeps away layers of hard-edge pattern and geometrical structure, paring down details and leaving behind their ghosts. Lines, grids and diagonals may suggest horizons, architecture, movement, passage and depth; curves evoke plant forms and the female form. On first impression, these restrained marks appear to stand alone as mere surface design, abstracted from referential meaning. As the eye familiarizes itself with their relationships, however, they fall into place as diagrammatic indications of fragments of dimensional space.

On a recent studio visit in Portland, Maine, we discussed Jones' upcoming exhibitions. For "3 x 3," a three-person show at the Chocolate Church Arts Center in Bath, Maine scheduled for April, she will exhibit a dozen of her completed collages and a handful of new oil panels. In August through November, she will exhibit jointly alongside a multi-media installation by Mass College of Art and Design professor Deborah Klotz at the Maine Jewish Museum in Portland. By then there will be more collages, new oils on panel (large and small) and works of oil and gouache on paper.

(The following conversation during my visit to her studio was edited and reordered for clarity and emphasis.)

PENELOPE JONES (PJ): With collage, I have always worked on a small scale, because the preexisting pieces I draw from and cut up tend to be small. Collages take a long time to make. It's not about chance, like Dada or Surrealism; it's very deliberate. I change things around a lot, bringing things in and out, like supporting players within the whole. It all has to work before I glue.

The physical process of fabricating the collages is different from working on a painting. Unlike painting, where you take [a surface] away and do something else, with collage your palette is physical, everything is already there. You have whole boxes of color.

Usually, I'm a little more organic in the way the collage is coming together. With the "Border Series" I gave myself the problem of putting that order in first. Starting with the border edge, which I vary in size from collage to collage, I have to work within that frame. It gives me a structure to respond to.



TEN FOR 2024

PENELOPE JONES' STRIPPED-DOWN ABSTRACT VISIONS

PENELOPE JONES

PENELOPEJONESSTUDIO.COM

3 X 3: 3 ARTISTS, 3 MEDIUMS SCOTT CUNNINGHAM, PENELOPE JONES

MARY MCKONE ART GALLERY

THE CHOCOLATE CHURCH ARTS CENTER

804 WASHINGTON STREET

BATH, MAINE

APRIL 12 THROUGH JUNE 8

PENELOPE JONES AND DEBORAH KLOTZ

MAINE JEWISH MUSEUM

FINEBERG FAMILY COMMUNITY ROOM

267 CONGRESS STREET

PORTLAND, MAINE

AUGUST 29 THROUGH NOVEMBER 1



TOP: Penelope Jones, *Untitled Work in Progress*, 2023, oil on paper, coated wood panel, 12" x 13". Photograph by Jay York.

BOTTOM: Penelope Jones, *Border Series #4*, 2023, collage on paper, 5 3/8" x 4 3/4". Photograph by Jay York.

Like my paintings, I start three or four panels at once, moving pieces around, seeing how they dialogue with each other. Then they start to coalesce, and I start gluing. I don't like to paint over them. They are what they are, and when they're done, they're done. If they don't hold up, then they get cut up again and recycled back into the mix.

ELIZABETH MICHELMAN (EM): How is time a factor?

PJ: Some of the time is putting down paint — or pieces, if it's collage — and then letting them sit on the wall until I'm ready to re-enter. I need to do a lot of observing and exploring. Things need to settle. Rarely will I finish one piece in one sitting. Sometimes I get seduced into the beginnings of something — but if it's too spontaneous, I haven't invested enough time yet. I like the mix of spontaneous with the more refined mind, the contrast of gesture versus more exacting, Mondrian-like preciseness.

EM: In these times of turmoil, does the political come into your art?

PJ: I'm weighted down with the politics of this world; I don't feel the need to bring that into the work. I'm trying to be grounded in the wonder or the awe of being in the world; what moves me; light and color, the structure, the formal issues, the visual, the sensations that I see around me. There's beauty and ugliness, too, like Soutine, not just flowers and things. I'm not trying to escape something; I'm trying to enter something that feels important to me. I need that to survive, to counteract the horrible things that are going on.

Things that inspire me are artwork that happened long ago. My works with geometry and with Islamic patterning came directly from time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art drawing in the Islamic wing, this room with beautiful tile work...

EM: The consciousness of drawing Islamic patterns in 2015 is different from the consciousness in 1915.

PJ: I was drawn to the beauty, pattern and structure, the philosophy behind the design. As I worked on it, I thought about contemporary issues. I labeled one "Green Zone." I kept thinking about this huge overlap of cultures — Islamic, Judaic. At last, I asked, "What am I doing here, is this appropriation of this culture?" I decided to put it aside — for now. I kept on with linear and hard-edge elements, the curve and the circle.

EM: Do you feel a commitment to feminism in your relation to feminine practices?

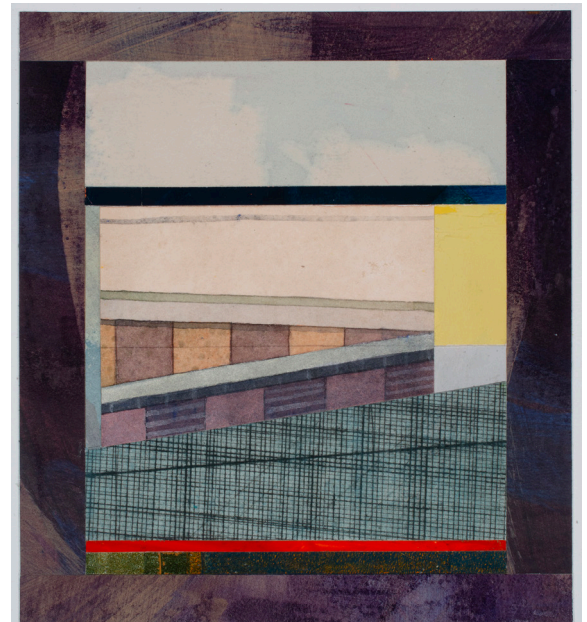
PJ: As a teenager, I was a weaver. I loved creating patterns and designs. Those ideas began to come back when I was trying to pull in my love of patterns and I thought, why not introduce that into my art? I can take paintings to a different level than I would a warp on a loom. I loved weaving but didn't consider it an art when I was doing it. But it was the underlying influence, and it gave me permission to lean towards or into the feminine. That's okay.

EM: Who are your heroes?

PJ: Mondrian, Paul Klee, Piero, Jacopo Pontormo, Brice Marden. They're all men!

EM: Alright, who are your women?

PJ: Collage artist Anne Ryan, a student of Kurt Schwitters. Writer Virginia Woolf. At Cornell I wrote my thesis about "To the Lighthouse" and Etruscan painting. I don't know how I put those together, but I was just so drawn to it. There's [Woolf's artist character] Lily Briscoe and this thing about "getting to the lighthouse." I related it to how you get to that place where things feel right and settled. It's that process of searching and getting there. That journey.



Elizabeth Michelman

TOP TO BOTTOM: Penelope Jones, Border Series #3, #5 & #2, 2023, collage on paper, 5 3/8"x 4 3/4". Photograph by Jay York.