

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Why There Are Great Artists

by John Yau on March 31, 2012



Sylvia Plimack Mangold, "Floor with Light at 10:30 am" (1972), acrylic on canvas 52 x 61 in/132 x 155 cm
(All images courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York)

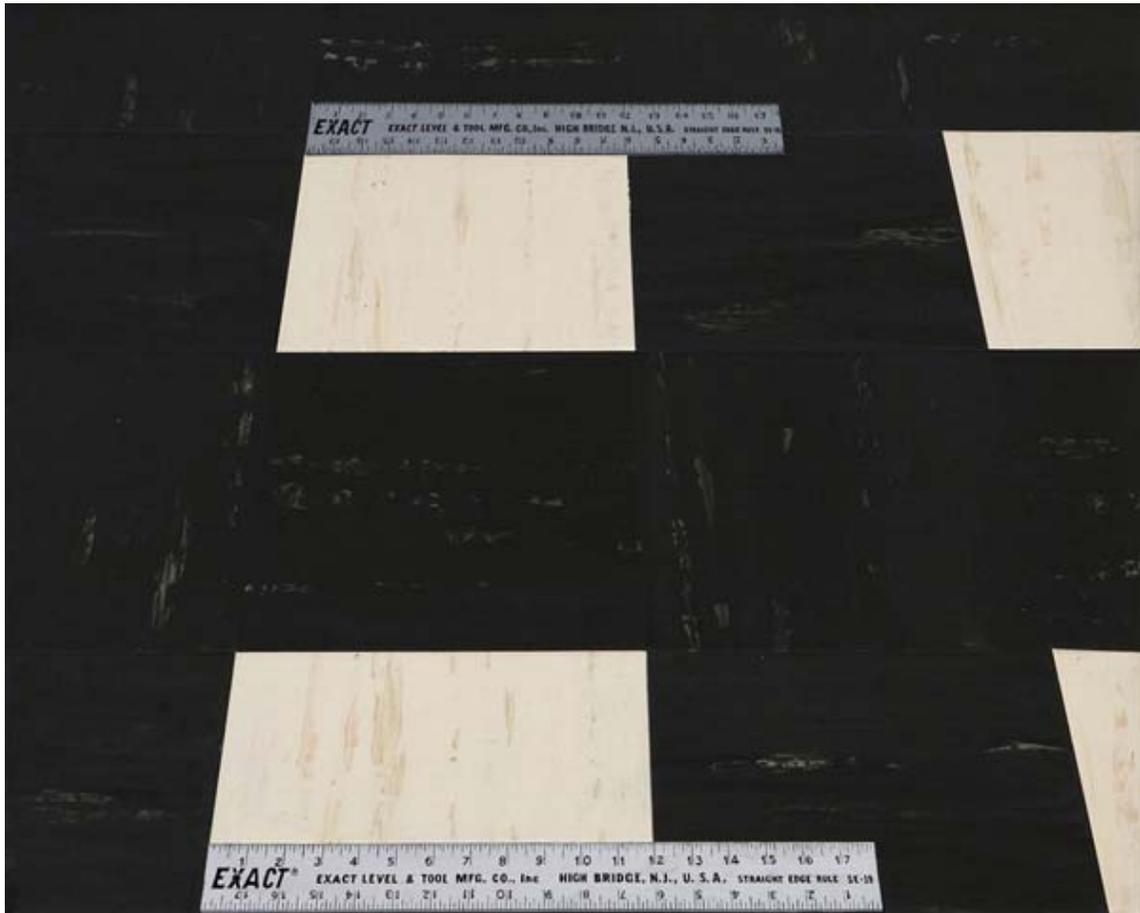
The current exhibition of paintings, watercolors, and prints by Sylvia Plimack Mangold at Alexander and Bonin (March 16–April 28, 2012) got me thinking once again about the different kinds of spaces she has constructed in her work, beginning with the tilting planes in her early paintings, such as "Floor 1" (1967), "Floor with Light at Noon" (1972), and "Two Exact Rules on a Dark and Light Floor" (1975), all done in acrylic on canvas.

(It is worth noting that in 1967, around the same time that Plimack Mangold started doing the floor paintings, Al Held began working on his illusionistic black-and-white paintings, which have often been credited with, as Robert Storr recently put it in his catalogue essay, "muscl[ing] painting back into three dimensions without betraying its character as painting or his own long-standing commitment to the primacy of gesture." While I don't wish to dispute Storr's assertion, I do want to broaden the accepted perspective on the reintroduction of a constructed space in painting. I am suggesting that men get too much too credit, and we need to rethink our assumptions.

Alexander and Bonin

In a conversation that I had with Robert Creeley about Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams, he said that, for him, Crane was the exemplar of the heroic poet, while Williams represented the domestic poet. Rather than attempting heroism in his poetry, Creeley chose the domestic—he wrote about love, friendship, family, and things close to home in plain language, without metaphors. I find an affinity between Creeley's unadorned compressions of the everyday and Plimack-Mangold's intense, self-reflexive awareness, a quality shared by the other artists I will mention in this essay, all of whom happen to be women.

This leads me to advance that Held chose to work in the heroic mold, while Plimack Mangold elected to work in the domestic mold, and that these possibilities should be regarded as equals, rather than hierarchical. Bigger may not be better; it may be bombastic and corny. Accordingly, an intimate or modest scale need not be precious and meek, but in fact, profoundly ambitious.)



"Two Exact Rules on a Dark and Light Flooring" (1975) acrylic on canvas 24 x 30 x 1 1/2 in./61 x 76.2 x 3.8 cm

In retrospect, it seems to me that Plimack Mangold's early investigations of space should be credited with initiating a dialogue in opposition to Frank Stella's stripe paintings, which squeezed space out of paintings altogether, and the flat, grid-like floor sculptures that Carl Andre began after 1965.

In focusing her attention on the tight geometric patterning of a parquet floor, or the skewed rectangles of light cast by a window onto a wide pinewood floor, she literally cleared a space for herself. By using nothing but paint to build a believable space on a two-dimensional plane, thereby openly critiquing work widely regarded as upholding a narrative of progress that was implicitly patriarchal in its telling, she also challenged the received viewpoints and well-worn tropes that dominate (and continue to dominate) art history.

Alexander and Bonin

As long as we subscribe to the mainstream story, which culminates in the death of painting, aren't we upholding a patriarchal view that denies both women's achievements in painting and painting in general? Aren't the exclusions of women and people of color from the mainstream narratives about painting reason enough to reject any and all of them? Isn't there, as John Ashbery titled one of his poems, "The Other Tradition?"



"Exact and Diminishing" (1976), acrylic on canvas 30 x 72 in/76.5 x 183 cm

By the mid-70s, when Plimack Mangold began depicting rulers lying on a linoleum floor, she was offering a viable, non-literal alternative to Minimalist sculpture, Stella's hard-edged brand of Minimalism, and Mel Bochner's conceptual practice, in which measuring the width of a window within a gallery space was integral to the project. At the same time, rather than "muscl[ing] painting back into three dimensions" while underscoring it as a purely visual experience, where forms such as Held's geometries could deny gravity, Plimack-Mangold made paintings that alluded to the viewer's presence, as well as recognized the tension between the painting's surface and the subject's depth. With Held's paintings, you are the observer, while with Plimack Mangold's you are a participant. It is the opposite of Stella's pithy summation of painting, "what you see is what you see," because it is concerned with what you are.

In other words, there is a conceptual complexity to these paintings that critics often deny is possible in all painting, as if somehow painting is all just a matter of hand and eye coordination, with no thinking.

In addition to pushing back against the flatness that Clement Greenberg insisted was absolutely integral to painting, Plimack Mangold also distinguished herself from the painterly realists, such as Fairfield Porter and Alex Katz, whose work the poet-critics associated with the New York School championed. Like Porter and Katz, Plimack Mangold was an observational artist, but she never became a social painter or a portraitist — there are no people in her work. In addition, her preoccupation with exactitude led her to become meticulously attentive to the grain, knotholes, and coloring of a wooden floor, the slight color shifts in linoleum, and the effect of diffuse light on white walls. Moreover, in both the wooden and linoleum floor paintings, Plimack-Mangold went a long way toward dissolving the boundaries between representational and abstract painting.

Alexander and Bonin



"Untitled" (1969) acrylic on canvas 33 x 42 in/ 83.8 x 106.7 cm

Plimack Mangold's wooden and linoleum floors tilt back in space. Their low viewpoint conveys the sense of being on one's hands and knees, stopping now and then to look up, and survey the immediate surroundings. Although it is never clear why the viewer is in this position, the inclusion of the two long metal rulers in "Exact and Diminishing" (1976) suggests an equation between painting and labor, in this case the laying of linoleum panels. In each practice, one covers a surface with modular units that result in a grid. Painting and making a floor are not only equivalent, but foundational — each become the ground on which we walk, in our culture and in our home. Rather than transporting the viewer elsewhere, as Held's painting started to do in the late 1960s, Plimack Mangold's merging of subject matter and viewpoint opened up a space for self-reflection.

In *Exact and Diminishing* the artist depicts two vertically-oriented rulers; one abutting the painting's left edge, and the other dividing the composition's wide horizontal format in half. They are Plimack Mangold's "zips." The ruler on the left lies flat against the painting's two-dimensional surface, while the middle one tapers upward, suggesting that it is tilting away from the painting's surface and moving back in space.

Meanwhile, behind the rulers, the square linoleum tiles are rendered to appear parallel to the top and bottom edges of the painting, while converging inward. Their adherence to the logic of single-point perspective further suggests a backward spatial movement, this one more conspicuous than the dividing ruler. Historically speaking, Plimack Mangold's tilting linoleum tiles date back to the exploratory period of Early Renaissance, when rudimentary perspective was in the process of becoming codified.

Instead of being outside the scene and looking in, as we are in a genre picture like Gustave Caillebotte's "The Floor Planers" (1875), we are literally brought inside the space — a condition even more precisely articulated by Plimack-Magold's "Two Exact Rules on a Dark and Light Floor" (1975), where our physical presence is acknowledged by the position of the rulers, which suggests that we might be checking whether the tiles are correctly aligned.

Alexander and Bonin

The idea of being inside the painting — that there is a personal rapport between the viewer and the subject — goes back to Édouard Manet. And Sylvia Plimack Mangold is central to a strain of meticulous observational painting that not only acknowledges but also implicates the viewer.



"Golden Rule on Light Floor" (1975), acrylic on canvas 24 x 30 in/61 x 76 cm

While Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Pop Art, Painterly Realism, Photorealism, Conceptual Art, Neo-Expressionism and Neo-Geo have all come and gone, the observational artists devoted to decidedly plain views, beginning with Lois Dodd, have persisted in going their own way. A classmate and longtime friend of Alex Katz, Dodd makes paintings based on things she sees in or near her home, without resorting to anecdote or any of the other obvious visual hooks that might seduce us into looking. Highly formal, quirky, and interested in that which is generally overlooked or never noticed, Dodd's paintings anticipate those of Plimack Mangold, Catherine Murphy and Josephine Halvorson.

This tradition, made up of women artists who exert a high level of meticulousness in their work, and who to varying degrees eschew style, has largely flown under the radar for more than half a century. Other artists I think of as being part of this strain, in which meticulousness and exactitude are inseparable from seeing, include Yvonne Jacquette, Julia Fish and, more obliquely, Louise Belcourt and the sculptor Anne Arnold. The other connection is their insistence that one's engagement with painting is never a purely visual experience, that the body living in time is also present. Their engagement with subject matter opens up a reflexive space in which we connect with their paintings or, in Arnold's case, sculpture, both visually and physically.

Perception, memory and time are all linked, though never in ways that seem didactic. Central to all of their work is the edge — the carefully established boundary that determines what the viewer encounters.

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Why There Are Great Artists (Part 2)

by John Yau on April 7, 2012



Sylvia Plimack Mangold, "Absent Image" (1972) (all images copyright the artist)

Before writing about Sylvia Plimack Mangold's shift from interiors to landscapes, I think it is useful to once again consider the floor paintings, which she worked on for about a decade, beginning in 1967. It is in these paintings that the artist defines an approach to subject matter from which she has never wavered. She will paint only what she observes, but with more rigorous parameters than simply investigating her immediate circumstances. Her subject matter will never suggest an elsewhere or material plenitude. She will make no allusions to fantasy, leisure, or social status. It is incumbent on us to reflect upon what she does and doesn't do.

The domestic, as Plimack Mangold defines it, isn't just an alternative to the heroic; it is also resistant to any form of escapism, consumerism, appropriation (which is a form of consumerism) or anything else that would set the artist apart as an especially sensitive or privileged individual. Plimack Mangold's definition of the domestic arises out of her conscious joining of the aesthetic and ethical.

Alexander and Bonin

Among the other observational artists for whom the conjoining of the ethical and aesthetic is central, I would point to Lois Dodd, Catherine Murphy, Rackstraw Downes, Antonio Lopez Garcia, Isabel Quintanilla and Peter Dreher. For all of their so-called conservatism, attributed to their commitment to direct observation and meticulous painting, I would advance that their work is radical for the following reasons.

The art world doesn't have a place for their work and so constantly tries to stick it in a ghetto, such as "realism," which hasn't been considered modern enough since Cubism. This term ignores the conceptual implications of their approach to subject matter. And to make matters worse, Hal Foster and other influential art historians have repeatedly reiterated that since the artist cannot possibly beat a consumer-driven society, he or she must join it (a la Andy Warhol) by celebrating (or reveling in) its love of materialism, celebrity, spectacle and theatricality, which by some logic becomes an institutional critique.

But the idea of either beating or joining a group is a masculine view of the artist's options. As all of the above-listed artists prove in their work, one can choose to do neither. Each of them has declined to be a leader or a follower, which isn't to say they've dropped out or somehow become eccentric.

Among younger artists, which is to say those born around 1960 or after, who are interrogating the possibilities of direct observation, I would single out (in addition to Josephine Halvorson, whom I mentioned in my earlier post), Ellen Altfest, Sangram Majumdar, Joshua Marsh and Richard Baker, particularly his gouaches, in which he equates the work of art with a used book cover or record jacket (collectible or cultural detritus?).



Sylvia Plimack Mangold, "Nocturnal Ellipse" (1981)

Plimack Mangold's floor paintings can be roughly divided into three groups: those with parquet patterns and with a heap of laundry, 1967–71; those with mirrors and light cast from a window, 1971–76; and the ones with rulers and masking tape, 1975–77. Done over the course of a decade, each group was determined by where the artist lived. She is a diaristic painter who focuses on the domain of seeing rather than privileging the "I." During this ten-year span, she and her husband, the abstract painter Robert Mangold, lived in Manhattan before moving in 1971 to Callicoon, north of the city. In 1977, they moved to Washingtonville, where she and her husband have lived for the past thirty-five years.

Alexander and Bonin

In 1971, Plimack Mangold introduced a new element, a full-length, wood-framed mirror, into her work. The mirror's vertical shape suggests that it can be read as a surrogate for the viewer. In "Absent Image" (1972), the floor continues in the mirror, which reflects two rooms, the one in which it is situated and an adjacent room, which is literally behind where the viewer would be standing. Within the mirror's narrow view, the space recedes until it intersects a wall, with a part of a window visible in the upper right hand corner.



Sylvia Plimack Mangold, "Carbon Night" (1978)

Our eye travels back to the wall, and to the small section of the open window with the world outside. The view is partial. Floor, mirror, window, and walls — everything is interconnected, though there seems to be no underlying symbolic order to the connections; their placement is, in fact, largely the result of chance.

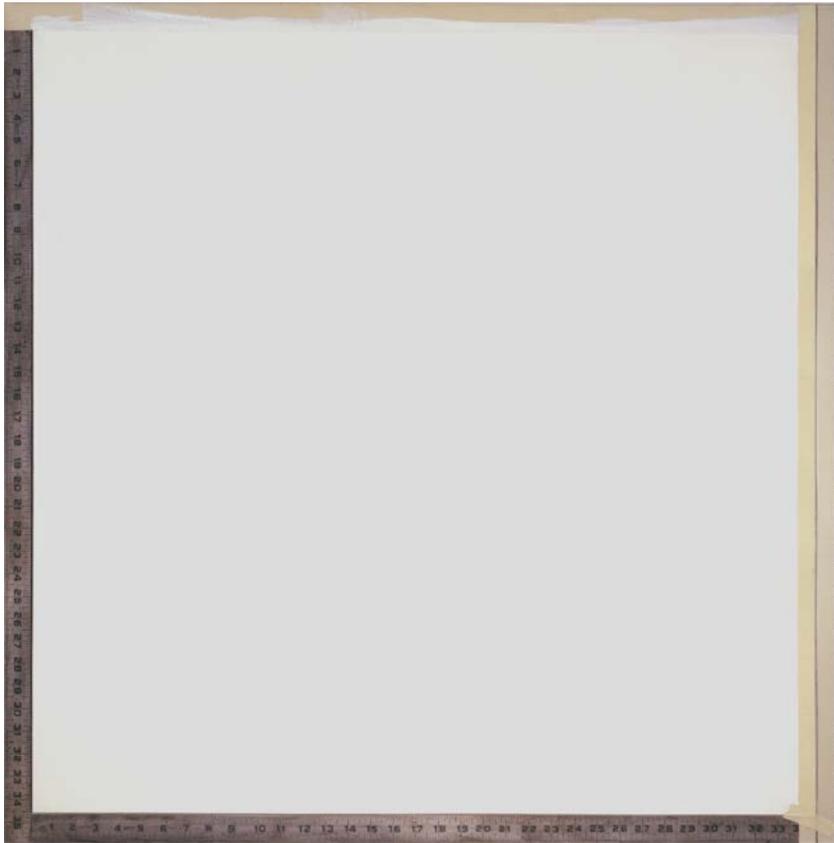
The mirror is leaning, which indicates its placement is impermanent — it will be moved. In the painting, nothing is fixed. The viewer senses that the room is incomplete, and still uninhabited, underscoring the larger fact, which is that the conditions of reality are provisional. Change and disruption are both inevitable and unavoidable. The artist absorbs this state of wakefulness into her work without resorting to drama or theatricality. Instead of hectoring us, she believes that we too will see what she sees, which grants us our autonomy.

In the mirror paintings, none of which reflect a human presence, the artist seamlessly folds a new level of meaning into the painting. We may shape our immediate circumstances, and even fill our rooms with all sorts of stuff, but the material world is indifferent to our existence. The rooms we move into will one day be clean and empty, waiting for the next tenant, as if we had never been there. Not reflected by the mirror, the viewer and the artist become the absent image. Mortality is what we have in common. Beginning with the mirror and floor paintings, the tension between surface and space gains in complexity. Completeness and incompleteness embrace, becoming inseparable.

The tension between the body's location and the eyes' movement, between our bounded physical being and the space we occupy, becomes a deeper, more abiding preoccupation between 1977 and 1983, when the artist focused her attention on the rural landscape surrounding her house.

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Plimack Mangold introduced “tape” into her work in “My Studio” (1975). In “Four Coats (1976) and “Anatomy of a Painting” (1976), she incorporated “tape” along with her “rulers.” This required her to build up a swath of paint, so that viewers initially believe they are looking at a piece of masking tape attached to the painting’s surface. In addition, its presence in the painting underscores the difference between the physical and the visual, and between apprehending reality through touch and through sight.



Sylvia Plimack Mangold, "Anatomy of a Painting"

In “Anatomy of a Painting,” the rulers and tape are located along the painting’s physical edges, defining a square, which Plimack Mangold has painted a pale pink. Presumably, the artist will make a painting on this ground. But, in fact, she seems to be asking, when is a painting done?

The artist’s monochromatic fields fit in with Minimalism, as well as share something with Mark Rothko, Ralph Humphrey’s frame paintings, Jo Baer’s “edge” paintings and Robert Ryman’s paintings in which the edges of the linen support are left bare. However, in contrast to Rothko’s paintings, where the weightless clouds of pigment evoke both the sublime and a sense of crisis, paintings such as “Four Coats” and “Anatomy of a Painting” embrace both the artist’s tools (ruler and tape) and the joy of starting out. In this regard, her work argues with the paintings of Rothko, Humphrey

and the others I have cited because it is simultaneously finished and unfinished, complete and incomplete.

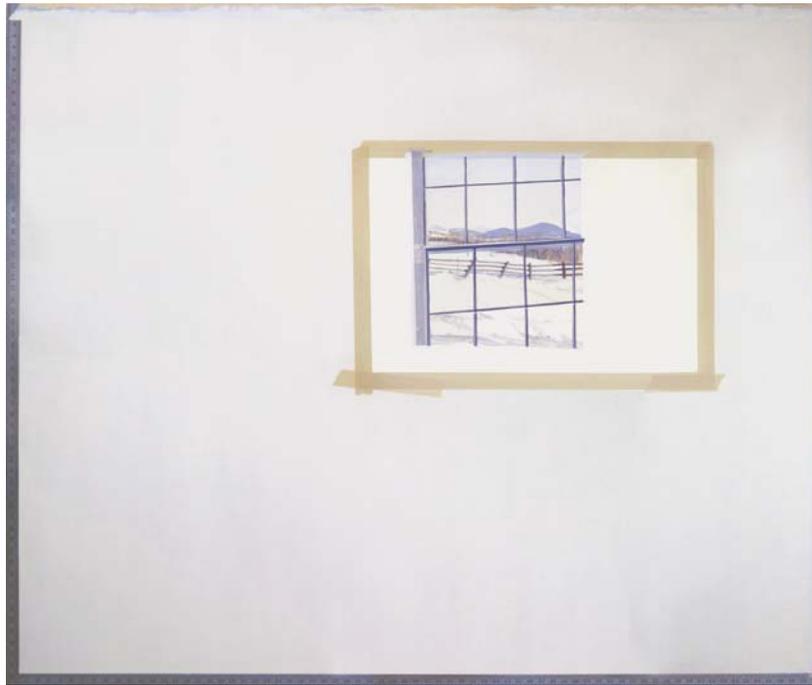
“Anatomy of a Painting” conveys the artist’s conviction that, historically speaking, painting isn’t at the end of something, but still in the beginning stages; that there is — both literally and metaphorically — so much more ground to cover.

(Theorists and art historians understandably reject a view of history as an open-ended, not necessarily logical group of disparate narratives and counter-narratives, none of which summarizes all the others, because it unseats them; they aren’t controlling the story. They will agree that reality is contingent only as long as they hold jurisdiction over the contingency.)

The unfinished state of “Anatomy of a Painting” is the opposite of the fixed status embodied in much Minimalist art and, as such, offers an implicit critique of that which is finished. But beyond that, it underscores painting’s changing state — that it is never done, even after the artist stops working on it. A painting exists in the world and is therefore vulnerable to its vicissitudes. The other issue that the “ruler and tape” paintings raise is the shift between our immediate physical environment and the immensity of our surroundings, between solid ground and the abyss.

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Starting with “January 1977” (1977) Plimack Mangold began to slowly move toward the landscape. It is a view through a window, which has been cropped. We see only part of it. The incomplete window and the cold white wall are framed by “masking tape,” which sets them off from the slightly mottled, whitish ground of the painting. The left and bottom edges of the canvas are demarcated by rulers, with the top and right edge demarcated by “tape” over which some paint has spread. No matter how much we see, reality exceeds our capacity to fully comprehend it. At the same time, we recognize that both the painting and the view through the window are going to change, but the artist at least has control over the painting.



Sylvia Plimack Mangold, "January 1977" (1977)

In “Carbon Night” (1978), done in acrylic and oil, one sees evidence of the artist’s decision to not fit in, to step away from received ideas about landscape painting. Instead of focusing on the landscape during daylight hours, or at an extreme moment of light (sunrise or sunset), as the Hudson River School artists often did, she choose those hours where the darkness (after sunset and before sunrise) threatens to absorb the landscape and blunt its detail.

It is in the nocturnal paintings that Plimack Mangold not only switched from acrylic to oil but also changed her approach. Instead of using a style — a fixed way of seeing — to depict the landscape, she looked to art history in her efforts to bring diffuse light into her work. As Cheryl Brutvan pointed out nearly twenty years ago, in her catalogue essay, “Collision”:

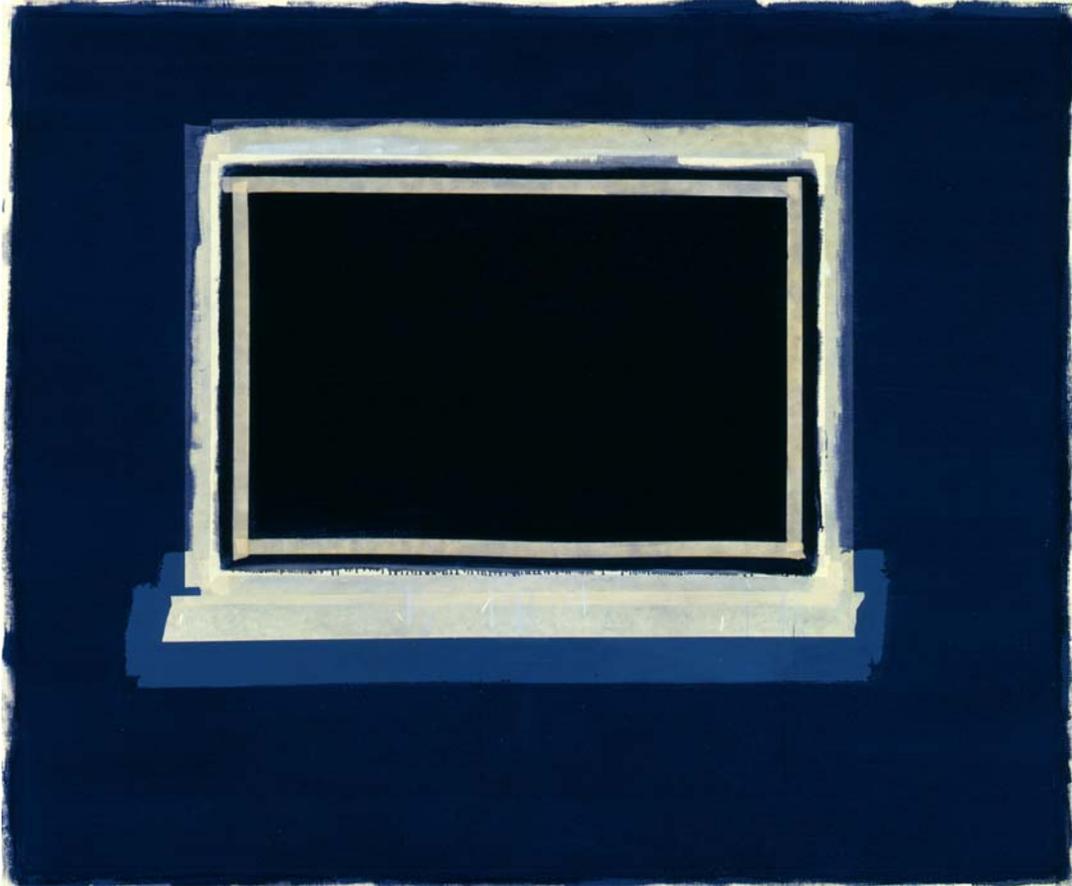
Plimack Mangold studied especially the paintings of James McNeill Whistler, whose “Nocturnes” guided the exploration of her new palette. His compositions also appealed to her for the paradoxical relationship between the deep space of the subject and the artist’s fine attention to the canvas’s surface.

Formally speaking, Plimack Mangold’s paintings of nocturnal landscapes are juxtapositions of light and dark, form and light, solidity and diffusion, surface and deep space. The layers of tape, which both frame and define the boundaries of the landscape, serve multiple purposes beyond their functional one.

At a basic level, the “strips of tape” are physical things the artist has incorporated into the painting, reminding us that seeing is only one of the ways we apprehend reality. The tape underscores our perception of the painting as being unfinished and therefore incomplete, or rather; it challenges our notion of completion.

Alexander and Bonin

In "Nocturnal Field" (1979), the landscape is so black that we can barely see into the painting, certainly no more so than we can see into a black painting by Ad Reinhardt. At the same time, the black field becomes an endless space, something we don't want to enter into because it is unlikely that we will be able to extricate ourselves from it.



Sylvia Plimack Mangold, "Nocturnal Field" (1979)

By framing the abyss with a solid form (tape), which separates it from the blue ground (surface) surrounding it, Plimack Mangold punctures the painting with a black hole. In doing so, she acknowledges that diffusion can intervene at any moment, that we cannot control time's passing, even as we shape it into something to reflect upon. The artist recognizes that there is no sanctuary from time, no elsewhere that we can take refuge in. As much else about the social world, materialism is a distraction full of false promises.

The night skies in "Schunnemunk Mountain" (1979) and "Nocturnal Ellipse" (1981) are portals leading to infinite space and thus infinite time. (A curator should put together a small show of Plimack Mangold's nocturnal paintings and Jasper Johns' *Catenary* paintings, particularly "Bridge" [1997].) Plimack Mangold has framed the night sky in tape, but she has not turned away from the glimpse of infinity, which awaits us all. The calmness in her looking is breathtaking and joyful. She doesn't want to miss a thing.

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Why There Are Great Artists (Part 3)

by John Yau on April 15, 2012



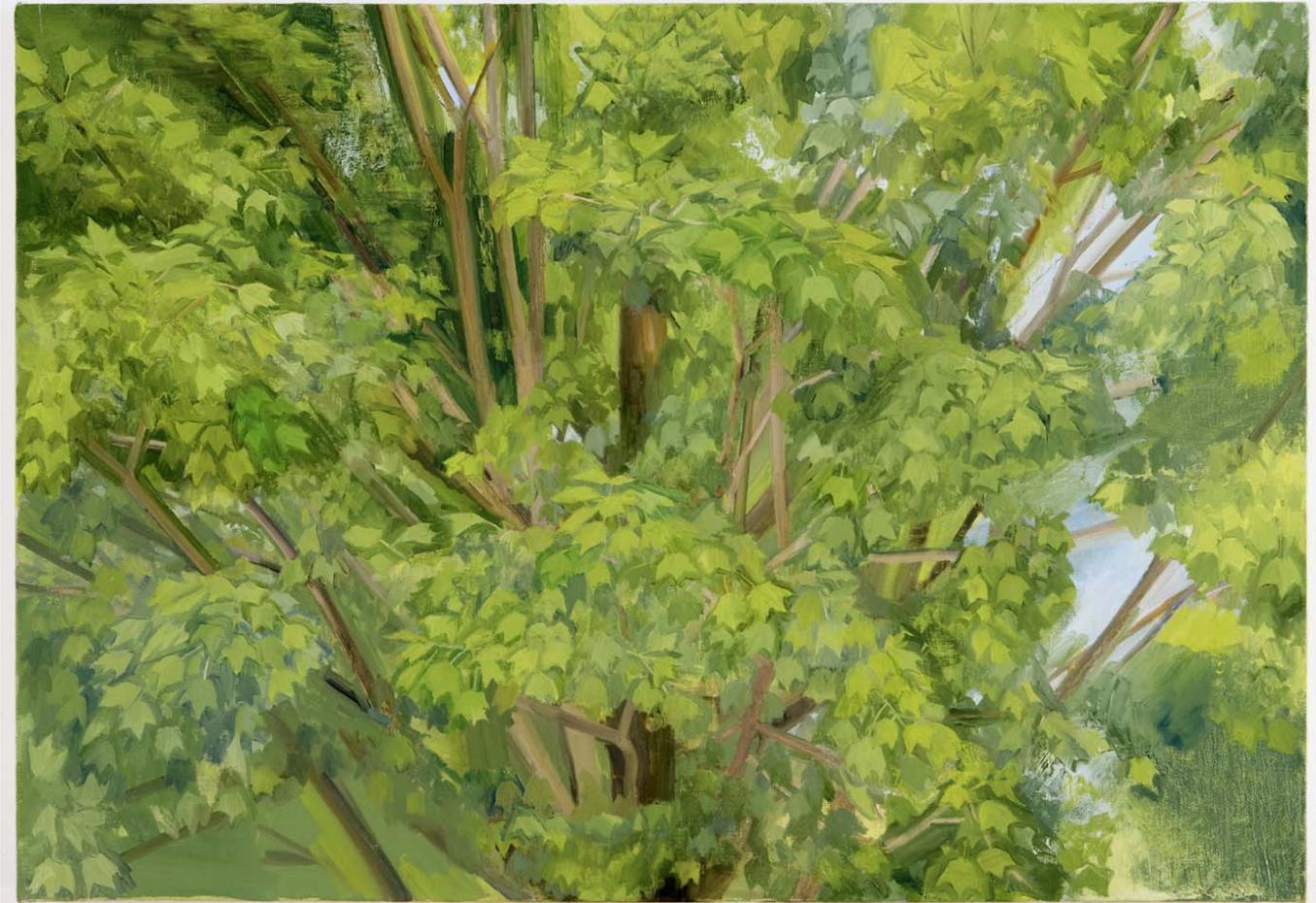
Sylvia Plimack Mangold, "Winter Maple" (2010)

The rigorous parameters that Sylvia Plimack Mangold established in her earlier bodies of work (the floor paintings and the landscapes framed by "tape") continue to inform her paintings of individual trees (specifically the maple, elm, locust, and pink oak), which have been focus of her attention since the early 1980s. Year after year, in different seasons and subtly changing light, the artist has returned to the same handful of subjects seen from the same tightly cropped viewpoint.

Alexander and Bonin

The implicit challenge is to see the same subject fresh, to discover it anew through the use of a particular medium. For Plimack Mangold, seeing and touch are inseparable. One senses that she feels her way across the surface, as she did in her floor paintings.

When she draws in graphite, she is conscious of the tension between contour and volume. In her watercolors, she registers different kinds of light, and their interaction with surfaces and rounded volumes. And in the paintings, she explores the various stresses between surface and depth. From the linear to volumetric, from light and transparency to opacity and surface detail, each medium emphasizes different requirements on her alertness to a set of particularities.



Sylvia Plimack Mangold, "Summer Maple 2010" (2010)

By 1992, the "tape" was no longer present in any of her work. (Although covered in paint, the "tape" is still visible along the painting's edges in "The Maple Tree" (1992).) At the same time, the artist was moving closer to her subjects, eventually focusing on a single tree, rather than a group of them. In addition, Plimack Mangold began employing a frontal viewpoint in which it seems as if we are not standing on solid ground, some distance from the tree, but hovering in the air like a hummingbird, avidly gazing at the upper portion of a fairly common tree.

The recurring framing of the tree's upper portion, with neither the main trunk nor the end of the highest branches visible, may be (practically speaking) impossible from a human point of view, but it is also, as I see it, absolutely integral to the artist's intentions.

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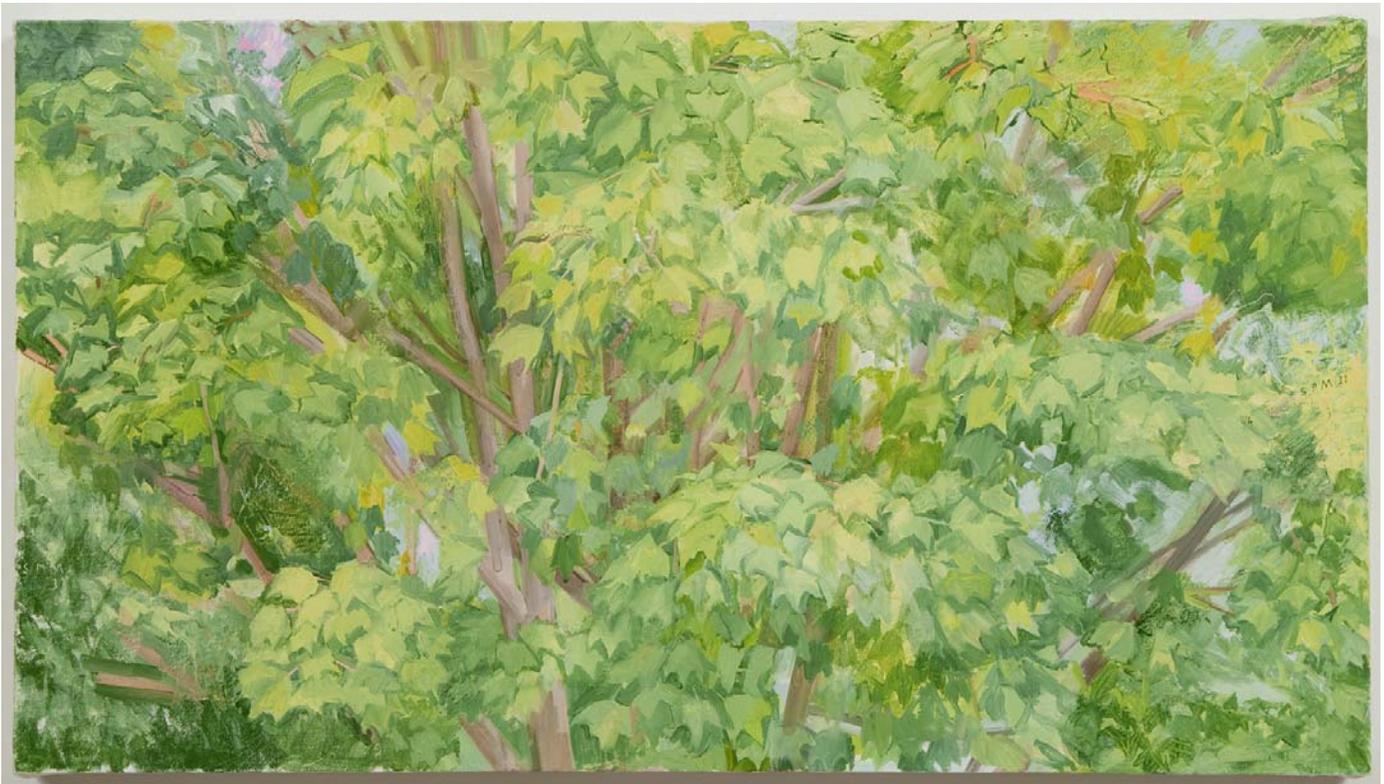
There is nothing casual or arbitrary about Plimack Mangold's decisions. By refusing to work within the conventions of landscape painting, particularly those that convey an omnipotent vantage point (a sign of ownership), she was able to define a radical perspective, which I would advance is simultaneously aesthetic and ethical.

Like her views of the maple tree, in both winter and summer, we too are in the middle, unable to see either the beginning or the end of a constantly growing and changing form. The elevated viewpoint also makes us more conscious of our bodies, implicating us as surely as the viewpoints we encountered in the artist's floor paintings.

In the paintings of the maple in winter, the tightly cropped space is paradoxically compressed and vast, while the paintings of the same tree in the summer convey a complex space that viewers must intuit because it is hidden by the splays of leaves pressing up against, as well as hanging at different angles to, the picture plane. The leafy branches become, in effect, slightly bending, protective planes made of distinct, mosaic-like units. We are on the outside, but we cannot look in, while with the paintings of the leafless maple we both look at and through.

Meticulous in her attention to each floorboard and section of linoleum, Plimack Mangold has brought this same degree of concentration to the trees, to the bare winter branches in winter and to the multifaceted, overlapping and intersecting patterns made by their leafy branches in the summer. Her sensitivity to the interplay between light and surface, which we first witnessed in paintings such as "Floor with Light at Noon" (1972), has become particular to the point of being preternatural.

By repeatedly exploring the same viewpoint, and registering the tension of surface and depth as it plays out on the picture plane, Plimack Mangold has been able to slow down and to some extent shape time, even as she acknowledges that she lives in its continuous passing. As evidenced by the way she frames her subjects, she recognizes that reality always exceeds what the individual can apprehend of it.



Sylvia Plimack Mangold, "The Maple Tree (Summer)" 2011

Alexander and Bonin

While observers have pointed out that the paintings of the maple in winter are calligraphic and the ones of the same tree in the summer are all-over in their composition, I think it diminishes her work to see it as art about art. In her floor paintings, she was in conscious dialogue with the work of her peers, particularly the Minimalists, but that certainly wasn't all that was going on.

More than forty years later, she has moved into a territory that is more particularly her own. She has folded her understanding of the individual's relationship to the everyday world into her circumscribed views. In this regard, her paintings are philosophical and self-reflective, and have been since the beginning of her career.

Each maple leaf is oriented toward the picture plane. Some seem to be almost pressing against it, as if against an invisible windowpane. Others are parallel to, but at some distance from, the picture plane. And still others are tilted away from the surface or are pointing at it. It is impossible to determine if there is an underlying pattern or axis towards which all the branches are oriented. There is a pleasure that is to be gained from getting lost in the painting, from following it wherever it takes us. More than offering us a space for looking, it also offers us a space of contemplation. Among other things, one is likely to notice the different degrees of finish in the leaves. Some are outlined in a darker green, turning them into ghostly silhouettes. Others seem to hover between precise shape and a smear of paint. Change, rather than stillness, is at the heart of the summer paintings, a sense that they are both complete and incomplete. Plimack Mangold may have gotten rid of the tape, but that doesn't mean she changed her philosophy.

Looking at these paintings requires us to constantly refocus our attention, to move across and in and out of the implied spaces. Along with making the position and repetitive shape of each leaf distinct, Plimack Mangold registers the shifts of light and shadow on the leaves' surfaces. Some areas, almost always near the painting's edges, are more abstract — a spread of paint, for example.

Within a relatively small area, the leaves can change from outlined silhouettes to planes in the distinctive shape of a maple leaf. And within a single painting the light can shift from crisp to hazy. Clearly, Plimack Mangold has decided to be precise and meticulous without using photographs. One reason she might have rejected using mechanical means, such as a camera, is because it intervenes, taking some of the responsibility out of her hands. Using her eyes alone also enables her process and image to exist outside of a specific moment.

The space we intuit in the summer maple painting, but cannot see, evokes a vision of the self as having an exterior and interior, a public presence and a private space, which are distinct but connected. The leaves don't form a perfect armor, so to speak. The surface (or skin of the painting) is made up of parts that form clusters. It is vulnerable to light, air, and weather — the everyday world.

On looking at ordinary things and suggesting that they possess inaccessible spaces, Plimack Mangold makes a subtle but important distinction between the personal and the private, which runs counter to a media-glutted world in which reality TV and confessional memoirs are popular. Reality TV collapses the personal and private. It tries to convince viewers that there is no difference between reality and fiction, and that ultimately one wants to expose everything because there are only surfaces, that we live in a house of mirrors in which there is no self, only reflections and projections of our material desire. By neither joining nor fighting mainstream culture, Plimack Mangold proves that another choice can be made.

The winter maple paintings are a tangle of upward reaching, tan branches pressing against a muted blue sky, the concrete and the limitless. Tonally, each branch changes as it rises up. Sometimes the artist registers the change from shadow to light. Other times, the brushstroke stops and becomes a different color. As a rule, the branches tend to be slightly lighter at the top, because they are closer to the light.

Alexander and Bonin



Sylvia Plimack Mangold, "Winter Maple" (2007)

There is a tension between the edges and the spreading, rising branches. The fact that we cannot see the tree in its entirety underscores our own desire to see and experience more, as it acknowledges that there will always be a limit, which we bump up against. In this regard, the rising branches mirror the viewer's desire to see and know more. At the same time, by tightly cropping the view, the artist introduces a note of discomfort and unease.

Looking at Plimack's maple and locust trees, we are not sure where we are. There is literally and figuratively no ground on which we are standing. It is also true that we cannot see everything we want, and certainly have no access to either the beginning or the end of the very thing in front of us, much less something larger and more comprehensive. And yet for all the possible frustration and gloom such consciousness might produce, that is not what comes across in the paintings.

There is the artist's quiet devotion to the everyday, with no sign that she is discontent or wishes to be elsewhere. There are the brushstrokes that change as they move up the painting's surface, registering subtle change. There is her evident openness to the commonplace, to sunlight and sky. It is apparent by everything we encounter in the painting, from the slight tonal shifts in the muted blue sky to the sturdy brushstrokes that we read as branches, that Plimack Mangold welcomes the ordinary facts of the material world, as well as surrenders to the pleasures of seeing beauty in change and the everyday. Recognizing that time has dominion over her, she repeatedly refuses to look for sanctuary. Together, both what she does and doesn't do become the hallmarks of her greatness.