

Kemp, Garrison shine at Troy's Arts Center of the Capital Region

Two artists intrigued by color and its subtexts featured in exhibition

By William Jaeger March 9, 2016

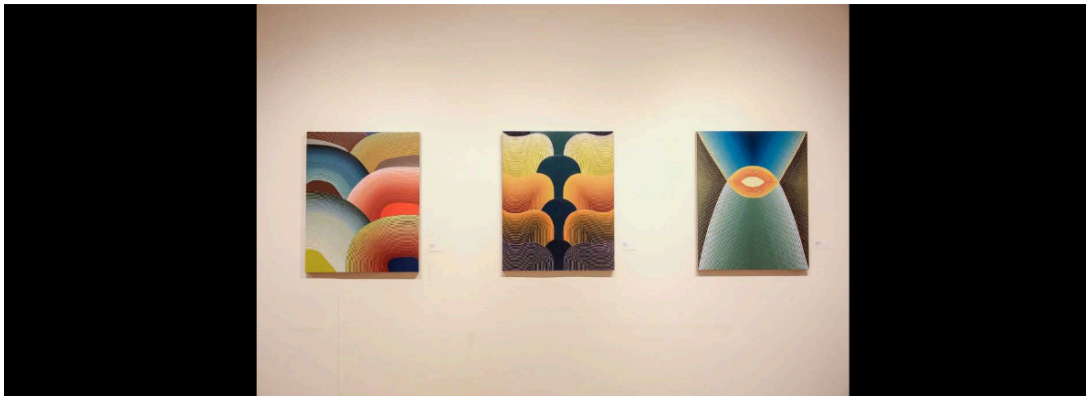


Photo: Katherine Wright



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Jenny Kemp L to R: Coined, Scaled, and Cross-Eye, 2016 acrylic on canvas 30 x 40 in. each Photo credit: Katherine Wright of YTK

If [Jenny Kemp](#) and [Richard Garrison](#) have something in common in their abstract, colorful works, it is an attention to detail, to repeating notions and to color itself. But in many ways they join here in "Living Color" at the [Arts Center of the Capital Region](#) from opposite corners of the ring, which makes for a fuller experience.

I've admired Garrison's work for years, and here is a show that pours his ideas out for us. The work might strike you at first as modest and merely curious, or even mindlessly obsessive and negligible. But there is a genius here that defies normal expectations of grandeur. This is work about distillation, and to its credit it does not compromise. The geometric whorls, like computer-generated mandalas, or like some kind of Goethe color theory starburst made for off-hours television, catch the eye, vibrating and full of unexplained nuance.

Their underlying order immediately suggests cause and effect. There are reasons for these arrays of perfectly irregular colors, and that is why you must dig. Take "[Dollar General](#)," a circular explosion about a yard across. Hundreds of rays made of a series of small squarish shapes shoot out in expanding progressions like petals of a daisy. Each ray varies in length (only a few reach the far edge) and each varies in the range of gouache colors that outwardly unfold.

Around the far rim in tiny neat handwritten text is a key to this cipher: cat food (several times), kitty litter (once), bath tissue, dish soap and so on. This might jolt you, until you realize that the colors are a kind of summary of the use of those colors in advertisements, the entire work condensing visually the chromatic spread of a common flier selling household goods. The full title helps: "Circular Color Scheme: Dollar General, March 1-7, 2015, pages 1-8. Spring Savings!"

Don't mistake this for business school analysis (though Madison Avenue might learn something). This is a weirdly trenchant insight into what we think we prefer, or might prefer (if we buy these things), in limited terms — particular colors, arranged in a quasi-realistic order, suggesting relationship and quantity. It does not make sense in the end, which is a relief. This is art, after all, and of a sophisticated kind once you let it sink in.

Next to this is another large work, which I'll shorten to "Garrison Household." The little swaths of color are now cut-out bits of actual packaging from products at the artist's house two years ago. The fact that commercial color logic infiltrates our own breakfast tables starts to show a sociological edge to the work — muted, and unavoidable.

This is most evident in a pair of small circular color schemes from Dick's Sporting Goods ads, especially "Select Regular Price Rifles and Shotguns on Sale." Reduced to mere hue and saturation, all pretty earthy burgundies and autumn hues, the peppered dollops of bright crimson red become undeniably bloody.

Kemp's half of this generous show concentrates on purely gorgeous color and design. Here color theory is unfolded for the eyes alone. Repeating (and repeating) thin, curving lines shift their hues in perfect regularity from one zone to another, and from dark to light. Up close, you can see the controlled progression with each parallel line. From a distance, the lines compound into broad vibrating shapes. The gouache here is applied with the pure density it is famous for, pure pigment glowering in all these stripes and furrows, like plowed fields seen from the air.

If you must read into Garrison's work to get their impact, I think it would be a mistake with Kemp's. Even the two short videos showing animated versions of Kemp's drawings being built and disassembled line by line are very much about what you see. Maybe the titles lead us along — "Tulip" certainly looks floral — but proceed at your own peril. What really matters is concentrated, deliberate and sufficient color.

William Jaeger is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.