

Josette Urso Paintings Translate Visual Cues into Colorful Abstraction

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by Susan Hodara

LARCHMONT, NY—A passing flock of pigeons. A dishtowel resting near a blender. A young woman twirling a Hula Hoop on a Brooklyn rooftop. The Manhattan skyline in the distance, lights twinkling as the sun sets.

Gallerygoers won't see any of these scenes depicted figuratively in [Josette Urso](#)'s newest body of abstract paintings, "On Air," at [Kenise Barnes Fine Art](#) in Larchmont in Westchester County. But all are present, along with a slew of other visual cues surrounding Urso as she works in her window-lined studio in a renovated knitting factory perched on a hilltop in Bushwick, Brooklyn.



“Second Story” by Josette Urso, 2017. Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches. Photo: Josette Urso. Courtesy of Kenise Barnes Fine Art.

There, she alternates her gaze between the urban vistas outside, with their carnival of unexpected sights, and the array of objects inside: tools and papers, collections of found materials, the small wire sculptures that she makes and hangs in her windows, intercepting her view. Then she translates it all into explosions of color and layers of colliding shapes made with brushstrokes that range from delicate dry lines to textural daubs, spatters and scrapes to free-flowing ribbon candy-like swirls. In her artist statement, Urso describes this approach as “moment-to-moment extrapolation.”

“I go from seeing to painting,” she said on a recent afternoon in the Larchmont gallery. “I look in every direction simultaneously, and I respond.”



“Zero to Eight” by Josette Urso, 2017. Oil on panel, 20 x 16 inches. Photo: Josette Urso. Courtesy of Kenise Barnes Fine Art.

Urso sat amidst the 11 canvases that comprise her show, her first solo exhibition at the gallery, which has represented her work for nearly a decade. In her 50s and married to the artist [Peter Schroth](#), Urso is tall and lean, with large dark eyes and shiny brown hair cut short. An instructor at [Cooper Union](#), she is the recipient of grants from, among others, the [Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation](#) and the [Pollock-Krasner Foundation](#).

The artist has shown her work at the Kathryn Markel Fine Art galleries in New York City and Bridgehampton, NY. Urso has also had numerous residencies, including stints at [Yaddo](#); the [Millay Colony for the Arts](#); the [Ballinglen Arts Foundation](#) in County Mayo, Ireland; and Loft Nota Bene, in Cadaqués, Spain, where she spent last summer.

Each of these settings infused the paintings she made while she was there. “All of my work is influenced by place,” Urso said, “not only its appearance, but its spirit.”

As she discussed her process, she spoke generously, with an exuberance that mirrored the energy in her paintings. “I thrive on not knowing,” she said, “on being as lost as possible, and then things start to reveal themselves that I don’t quite understand, but they have life, and they feel right.”

Urso works on multiple pieces concurrently and—to fuel the sense of being lost—she turns her canvases from vertical to horizontal and back as she paints. “I spin them around a lot so I can shake things up,” she said, “so I can see them as if I am seeing them for the first time.”

Standing beside *High Wire*, at 60 by 48 inches one of the two largest paintings in the show, Urso gestured toward a vibrant cluster of multicolored squares. “I had a notebook with color chips in it,” she said. “That’s where this one started.”



“High Wire” by Josette Urso, 2017. Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches. Photo: Josette Urso. Courtesy of Kenise Barnes Fine Art.

The weather outside and the fire escapes on neighboring buildings also provided influences. In the composition, there are stacks of horizontal dashes intersecting a yellow area, grids of red and blue horizontal and vertical lines, circles and blobs and other rounded forms speckled throughout. “You don’t know what’s in front of what, what is the shape and what is the background,” Urso said. “When everything is shifting, that’s what interests me.”

Achieving those moments on the canvas, she continued, is intuitive. “It’s like I am chasing something down, and I don’t know what I’m chasing, but when I see it, I know it’s right.”

Urso’s paintings are joyous and alive, urgent and assertive, enigmatic and poignant. All are from 2017, and all were produced for the exhibition.

The show’s smaller works, completed in the earlier part of the year, are calmer and more intimate, with comparatively subdued palettes. The billowing shapes in the 11- by 14-inch *Snow Glow*, the smallest on view, suggest a cloud-laden sky releasing flurries into a moody landscape.



“Snow Glow” by Josette Urso, 2015. Oil on panel, 11 x 14 inches. Photo: Josette Urso. Courtesy of Kenise Barnes Fine Art.

The larger paintings, created in the fall, teem with bursts of staccato patterns that on first glance appear random, but on deeper examination form visual relationships with imagery elsewhere in the frame. “There is so much going on in each one,” said Kenise Barnes, who established Kenise Barnes Fine Art as a gallery and art consulting firm in 1994. “That she is able to retain the clarity of the composition in the face of so many elements feels like a miracle.”

For Urso, it’s more mysterious—even frustrating—than miraculous, especially when it comes to finishing a piece. “I can get it to 90 percent,” she said, “but then I get stuck. Someone else might say, ‘Oh, this is a painting,’ but it’s not a painting to me. I know it’s close, but it’s not resolved.”

So there is more spinning of the canvas, more looking, more mark-making until, Urso said, “it finally turns the corner. I can feel it coming, that last 10 percent. I have to pay attention. It’s like a presence getting closer and closer. The marks start to slow down, and I get this sense of excitement.”

In Urso’s titles, she evokes references and connections, some easy to recognize, others elusive. The name of the exhibition, “On Air,” reflects not only her enthusiasm for painting, but also the immediacy of her practice. She likened it to being live on the radio. “You’re on the spot,” she said. “You have to show up.”

As for the individual titles, they can’t help but spur viewers toward more deliberate consideration. *Head Over Heels*, for example, is filled with frenetic neon-bright colors, except for a panel on the right, where four elongated ovals are interrupted by the edge of the canvas. Are they the soles of

shoes? Is an angular pink spike the heel of a pump?

Urso was noncommittal. "There may be feet in there going someplace," she said, "but I'm not going to say."



"Head Over Heels" by Josette Urso, 2017. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches. Photo: Josette Urso. Courtesy of Kenise Barnes Fine Art.

BASIC FACTS: "On Air: New Paintings By Josette Urso" is on view through February 17, 2018 at Kenise Barnes Fine Art, 1947 Palmer Avenue, Larchmont, NY 10538. www.kbfa.com.

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