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Magnificence in Miniature

Julie Evans' Eastern-inspired paintings are sumptuous, radiant gems

By: Mario Naves

Article: Adjectives like "ravishing" and "sumptuous" don't readily come to mind when considering contemporary art. "Slick," "homogeneous," "anonymous," "consumable" and (an old favorite) "transgressive" are more like it. Willfully obtuse proclamations that beauty has returned don't cut it: The real thing is hard to find.

Are artists contemporary if they work in a tradition that doesn't trace its lineage to Marcel Duchamp? There are, after all, living, breathing people making art that doesn't engage in cynical commentary. Does their work fall under some other rubric?

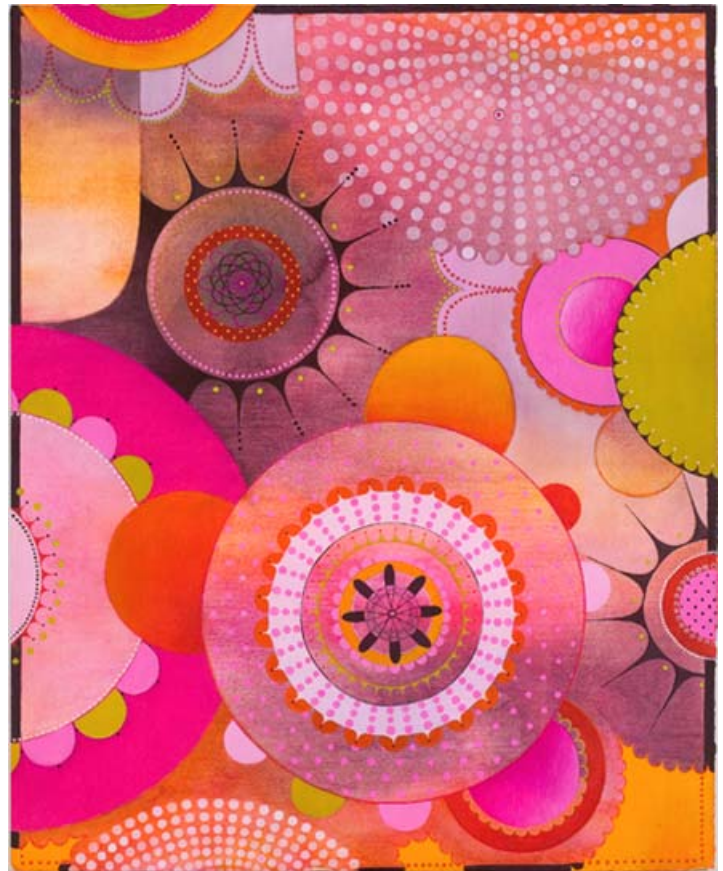
Distinctions, often painfully contrived, will be sorted out by history. In the meantime, attention should be paid to contemporaries who provide pleasure without apology or extra-aesthetic justification. The abstract paintings of Julie Evans, the subject of an exhibition at Julie Saul Gallery, do just that. They are-you got it-ravishing, sumptuous and beautiful.

Ms. Evans is inspired by sources from before the advent of modernism and, more importantly, from beyond Western culture. Radiant in color and crystalline in contour, her acrylic and gouache paintings point, clearly if not exclusively, to Indian art. She's no dilettante: Under the auspices of the Fulbright Program, Ms. Evans traveled to Sanskriti Kendra, an artist's retreat in New Delhi, to study the painting of miniatures.

Given the trajectory of Ms. Evans' art over the past 10 years or so, her studies paid off. The paintings-once populated by unappealingly fleshy blobs suspended aimlessly within atmospheric runs of color-have gained in focus, purpose and execution. Their newfound clarity can be traced, in part, to an increasingly intimate and, yes, miniaturist size. Ms. Evans' recent efforts are hardly bigger than a sheet of paper. The largest panel is 18 by 18 inches; in this context, it's positively Pollockian.

The internal scale of the paintings, in contrast, is immeasurable. The bantam formats and involved compositions are expansive and airy. Indian miniatures encapsulate impossibly detailed narratives, landscapes and architecture. Ms. Evans gave careful consideration to their spectacular precision; it's there to see in her pictures. Her decorative motifs-most consistently the circle, with recognizable botanical motifs here and there-float, ascend and drift in spaces that make the nighttime sky seem as shallow as a desk drawer.

Though it draws on a limited array of regulated shapes, Ms. Evans' vocabulary of form feels remarkably various. Overlapping mandalas are augmented with meticulously dotted patterns. Concentric circles radiate toward the viewer like fireworks stilled at the moment of explosion. Arabesques unfurl from out of nowhere. Stylized flowers arise and blossom. A thin frame of color runs around the perimeter of each panel without constraining the images.



Julie Evans' *Jhunjhunu (dusk)* 2006

Julie Saul Gallery

Unobtrusive humor informs Ms. Evans' quasi-psychedelic vision. Circles merge into cartoonishly bulbous shapes like speech bubbles devoid of words. Even better are the diagrammatic loops punctuating the paintings—they're drawn with a Spirograph. Damien Hirst employs spin paintings as a cheap Dadaist joke; Ms. Evans uses a vintage toy and conjures the cosmos.

Ms. Evans' rhythms are slow and calm, gentle and stoic. She achieves intensity through craft and color. The paintings evolve from scraped and slurred runs of paint, traces of which are intermittently revealed. The move from rough-and-tumble beginnings to an exacting resolution results in some tension, but ultimately there's little disconnect between the extremes. Ms. Evans brings these pictures exquisitely to fruition.

A gauge of a painting's success is that it can be "read" from up close and at a distance. In this respect, color is Ms. Evans' strong point. Entering the gallery, viewers will immediately be wowed by her exotic palette: It's as if you've never seen color before. Brilliant, almost neon pinkish-purples and burnished oranges predominate; slate grays, creamy yellows and deep greens bring things a little more down to earth without sacrificing sensuality. Ms. Evans' hothouse colors are almost decadent in their opulence; they reveal a ridiculously able colorist.

Writing in the catalog, the critic Michael Duncan describes the pictures as "machines of the spirit whose garlanded gears can swallow time." Ms. Evans taps into the artistic conventions of Eastern cultures with an admirable lack of self-consciousness, but satori isn't necessarily her thing. Her work may touch on the mystical as a reference, but her true strength lies in her luminous style. It doesn't diminish her accomplishments to say as much. Ms. Evans painstakingly reclaims the decorative. It's enough that the paintings are wonderful to look at.

Would that the gallery gave us less to look at. The 19 paintings on view add up to about a dozen too many. Ms. Evans' panels demand elbowroom in order to experience them without distraction. Placing one painting after another in fairly predictable fashion doesn't put their intricacies into high relief.

In this way, the gallery misses the point: Ms. Evans isn't an assembly line; she's a painter of consummate pictorial skill. Then again, hanging any of these paintings on the wall amounts to a validation of Ms. Evans' art. And given its verdant seductions, that's a boon for the rest of us.

Julie Evans is at Julie Saul Gallery, 535 West 22nd Street, until May 5th.

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