



Lori Ellison, *Untitled*, 2002, ink on paper, 11" x 8½", courtesy McKenzie Fine Art

## Lessons in Visuality

### Lori Ellison at McKenzie Fine Art in New York City

by John Mendelsohn

How we look at a work of art is how to read the world. It is as if artists create cryptograms that embody their own decoding, saying in effect, "The way that you look at this image is what I want you to know about being here." This is especially true of abstract art that wants to speak directly, ready for its telepathic download straight to the psyche of the viewer.

These notions arise from seeing the work of Lori Ellison. She makes drawings with ink on paper, and paintings with gouache on panels; earlier paintings employ glitter and glue. Most of the work in the exhibition at McKenzie Fine Art is from the past decade. Ellison's work is usually about the size of a sheet of paper, so to really see it you have to look closely, and to see the fine patterns that fill the surface you have to get very close. The intimacy of the encounter makes it a little like reading micrography, the ancient art of tiny words that taken together form a

picture or a design.

But in Ellison's art the macro does not exist as a predetermined image, more as the completion of the work of repeating a single shape, which may vary in size. These very small shapes include triangles and squares, ovoids and circles, as well as meandering, linked, and lobed lines. Their organization is at times in rows, grids, or echoing architectures. But more often the shapes respond to each other, creating a kind of organic geometry that grows into fields that move – gently pulsing, expanding, or curving within themselves.

This is work in which visually, the experience of seeing and responding to our own sense of delight, complexity, and immersion are paramount – we are taken on an engrossing visual trip. At the same time, there is the feeling that embedded in Ellison's art is a moral vision, a way of being. Here is some of what this work seems to point to:

#### **The value of human labor.**

This is hand work, meticulous but not finicky, sometimes minute in its scale. But still it is human, not mechanical, with the touch of a hand, individual and idiosyncratic. This touch is variable and imperfect, yet very skilled, allowing the personal to express itself within the strictures of the work. Here is human labor as patience and invention.

#### **Economy and modesty.**

This work uses simple means and a modest scale. This is art that can be done at a card table with one color and a brush. It does not need any more. It is telling us that what we need for now is what we have, and it is just a matter of what you do with it.

#### **Interrelatedness.**

In the changing densities of the fields is the constant feeling of being connected. The shapes have both an identity and an irreplaceable role in their small world. The single shape is always in relation to the next shape, and the next, and the next. They relate to each



Above: Lori Ellison, Untitled, 2004, ink on paper, 11"x 8½",  
Top right: Lori Ellison, Untitled, 2009, gouache on wood  
panel, 14"x11, courtesy McKenzie Fine Art



other socially, in continual affiliation,  
constructing something larger and  
beyond themselves.

### **Opening the hand of thought.**

This Buddhist phrase suggests that the thoughts that consume us are like the grip of the hand, which with relaxation can open. In relation to this art, with its devotion to detail (what some call obsessiveness), this phrase is an apt one. We are condemned or blessed to use the only means we have available to us, in this case our own tendencies, to find a measure of liberation.

### **Practice and transcendence.**

This work, with its sense of the meditative, is practice – step by step – and an act of realization. This art hints at infinitude, but it is simply here in our space, before our eyes.

Right: Lori Ellison, Untitled, 2011, gouache on wood  
panel, 10"x 8", courtesy McKenzie Fine Art

