

NEWS. ARTS. CULTURE. EVENTS. MARKETPLACE. BALTIMORE

CITY PAPER

Madeleine Keesing makes a major breakthrough at 73

By: Baynard Woods

Madeleine Keesing: *Particles*
Through March 15 at Goya Contemporary

Few artists are lucky enough to develop a late style, and those who do often find their late work unfavorably compared with their more youthful productions (How many times have you heard "I only like his early stuff"?). But occasionally an artist can arrive at a major breakthrough late in life and produce a new body of work that sheds light on the work for which she is already known while also significantly departing from it; Philip Roth's late run of novels springs immediately to mind. Madeleine Keesing's new show at Goya Contemporary makes just such a break.

Keesing, now 73, is known for the large, extremely textured paintings which she created by layering thousands of drops of oil paint into striated horizontal lines, producing an effect of overwhelming texture and surface somewhere between Color Field painting and fiber art. Her new work maintains a similar process but with an effect that is both an obvious outgrowth and a big break.

Instead of applying her drops of paint in overlapping, woven rows, Keesing began to apply them in fields that collide with one another to warp both space and, somehow, time in an effect that is far more like mosaic than weaving.

When viewed up close, the dots of oil in the 10 new paintings at Goya function almost like Seurat's pointillist distillations of color. Each circle of paint is girded by a shadow color. A sphere of blue overlaps with a purple one; a darker blue is eclipsed by a blue-ish gray. Or an orange is underwrapped by yellow-the whole thing set off against a solid background, usually of white or black. This is where the mosaic effect comes from. But then, stepping back, each field of such dots is juxtaposed with dozens of other fields, most often in stacked planes but also, as in the stunning "Origin," in an erratic swirl which brings them altogether at the center. Though the play of the fields of spots can call to mind Color Field painters and op art, the spatial effect is actually much closer to the early cubist explorations of Braque and Picasso, in which space and perceptions were the subject of the paintings.

Except those explorations were suffused by grays and browns, whereas Keesing's colors are more spectacular than ever. The frisson of the dots and fields in "Co-

ordinates" creates a stunning aqua-blue more vibrant than the sea in that recurring Caribbean beach daydream so common at this time of year. And the greens in "The Forest" or "Fields of Grass" pulse and flutter like sun-soaked vegetation on a perfect spring day. "Downtown" seems the most openly inspired by early cubist painting, specifically Fernand Léger's "The City," whose colors it shares.

All of this art history is cool. One can spend a nice afternoon thinking about these paintings and their influences. But more than anything, these paintings feel like they should be experienced. If they didn't cost tens of thousands of dollars, they could be the perfect vehicles for dorm-room bong-hit explorations. And I don't mean that as an insult. After an hour or so of walking back and forth between the paintings, I felt disoriented, as if the space in Goya's galleries had actually warped along with the space within the paintings. Depending on how close or how far you are to any of the paintings, the field of space you inhabit is different as it seems to pulse and writhe in non-Euclidean fashion. The paintings actually feel alive. Amy Eva Raehse, the gallery's director, says that she often hangs one of Keesing's paintings in her office and that they change over the course of the day, depending on the angle of the sun.

The space at Goya Contemporary adds to the effect, because the walls aren't joined to the floor or to each other, forcing soundwaves to wrap around walls in a way that makes all the passing sounds and voices of the Mill Center sound like part of Philip Glass' *Einstein on the Beach*.

According to Raehse, Keesing's shift in style is the result of extensive travel, including trips to Turkey, China, Japan, France, India, and Africa, where the combination of the experience of art, artifacts, and natural wonders inspired an exploration of her own practice. Instead of surface, Keesing became invested in space and used sculpture and printmaking to work out her ideas.

The results are everything we can ask for in a late style: the consolidation of hard-won success paired with radical innovations developed after a lifetime of practice. We're lucky to have the chance to see it.

For more information, visit goyacontemporary.com