

# The Solace of Repetition



**A**s abstract painting experiences its latest resurrection, questions about the nature of its revival arise as well. Shunted aside by the art world as if it were a dead language, its renewal prompts the ironic realization that very little in modern art has, in fact, been abstract. Even Picasso never produced a wholly abstract work. He simply questioned the myriad ways in which the world could be represented.

The vitality of abstraction today assures us that abstract painting can bear a profusion of contemporary narratives. This sense of art's ability to engage the present has encouraged a diversity of practices, allowing cultural and social issues to coexist with abstract form. Freed from the tyranny of labels and categories, the conceptual nature of painting has reemerged in the service of a multitude of voices—from a techno-conscious generation referencing unprecedented modes of communication to individuals wishing to incorporate all manner of autobiography and identity.

For painter Gary Komarin, abstraction has never been a formal dead-end. Rather, it has never been a formal dead-end. Rather, it has allowed him to challenge the limitations of the style, to make painting “include more” precisely because, to quote Komarin's early mentor, Philip Guston, a recognizable image “excludes too much.” While Komarin is not the type to write a manifesto, he

embraces the philosophy that intention is but a small fragment of our consciousness, that painting should be more about experience than a statement of intent. For nearly three decades Komarin has steadily produced a seemingly endless reconfigured vision—saturated and loose color fields punctuated by drips, splotches, and ghostly drawn geometries—indifferent to the ebb and flow of taste. And throughout he has remained quite content to allow each viewer “to bring something different” to his work.

Not all of the artist's paintings are abstract. Komarin's work over the years has involved various series of objects, abundant reiterations of seemingly innocent, idiosyncratic motifs such as wigs and cakes. Seen up close, however, these portraits of garish confections and artificially curled hair read almost as caricatures. Isolated or propped up on stands or supports, these hirsute and sweet items take on cartoon-like qualities, both touching and pathetic, as they conjure up myriad spectacles—from a wilting triple-tiered cake, its cloying decoration just off enough to remind one, sadly, of the clownish excess of an elderly woman's makeup, to hairdos and don'ts, whose teased styles, fraught with insecurity and hope, become surreal vagaries borne aloft with an air of pomp and pretense.

These discrete motifs contrast significantly with the serendipitous invention of Komarin's larger, abstract paintings. The latter are far more unconscious inasmuch as the artist, in both intention and execution, relinquishes a certain command of his work. He begins most if not all his paintings by placing stretched canvas on the floor and working horizontally, a technique that enables him, “to get lost inside the painting, to rapidly move about with a large brush in order to get something going, where I am painting faster than I can think, and allowing in most if not all cases for the paint to lead me. I usually sense immediately if something is happening and when I do, I put the brush down and leave the studio without looking back. When I return, I hang the canvas on the wall.”

Throughout his career, Komarin's repetitive, albeit improvisational, method has resulted in the accretion of a childlike visual vocabulary. Typical of this mannerism, for example, are the smudged, scrawled squares and cubes, tic-tac-toe grids, and bulbous fishlike shapes of the *The Blinding of Polyphemus*, playful elements that parallel the deceptively uncomplicated character of his wigs and cakes. All these elements share a quirky, unsophisticated quality that flirts unknowingly with the potentially dangerous unknown, not unlike the subversion to which his smaller, propped desserts and items of masquerade are subject. In addition to this array of shapes, Komarin

reinforces the notion of innocence through various stylistic tendencies: the repetition of form, or the retention of drips and scumbled, gritty surfaces. Moreover, and perhaps the most obvious, yet subtly childlike aspect, is Komarin's penchant for hyperbole, reflected in his painting's beguiling titles.

What does all of this have to do with the real subject of Komarin's work? The answer lies in his own childhood experience and its formative influence on him and his abstract language. Komarin's need to work from an instinctual, semiconscious state of mind is critical to understanding the evolution of his style and its deeper significance. One of his painterly goals is to create a work that is formed, in a sense, as it is made. In other words, that the picture not be preformed, that it reflect Wittgenstein's distinction between the way something *says* and *shows* what it means. In a statement that Komarin says underwrites his own aesthetic and philosophical position, Jasper Johns remarked: "I think one has to work with everything and accept the kind of statement which results as unavoidable, or as a helpless situation. I think that most art which beings to make a statement fails to make a statement because the methods used are too...artificial. I think that one wants from painting a sense of life. The final statement has to be not a deliberate statement but a helpless statement...To be an artist you have to give up everything, including the desire to be a good artist."

In addition to this conceptual underpinning, Komarin's art has always been concerned with focusing attention on visual nuances that he believes will convey enough meaning to constitute a substantive painting. His painterly process and symbolism, however, are tied to certain lifelong preoccupations. They are what lend a particular poignancy to his uninhibited process and childlike visual mannerisms and to his use of repetition and underscoring mistakes. The first revolves around water, specifically the lake whose opaque depths he grew up fearing when, as a child, he was taken fishing by his father. The second haunting and similarly unfathomable experience is one that involves his grandfather, who somehow survived the nightmare of Buchenwald where he spent his time moving rocks from one point to another, only to have to break them, and begin again. Both of these autobiographical strands have become deeply rooted in Komarin's work and, indeed, inform the process and visual language of his art.

On the surface, the artist's paintings proffer any number of scapes: a window, a beach, the sea. Sometimes the subject is self-evident, as in *Between Blue and You and Then Some*, where the application of a small white piece of canvas within an expanse of aquamarine and green suggests a shimmering sail, a nautical note barely noticeable on the horizon. While the initial issue of orientation and view is inevitable, it remains of secondary

importance. The language of abstraction is rarely transparent; its meanings are often oblique, and as in most of these paintings, the nuances of form signify their meanings in ulterior ways. What begs investigation in this otherwise straightforward seascape is the schematic repetition of form typical of Komarin's work. The triangular sail, for example, is re-articulated more than once, literally extended, drawn out as though doodled into a tent-like form, and, echoed, again, by another similar, though now looming cone-like geometry, which, cropped by the left margin, encroaches and dwarfs its counterpoints at sea. The additional presence of a dark form behind the sail, perhaps another boat, a hulking barge or freighter, easily morphs into a vase and as quickly into a still life reminiscent of the paintings of Giorgio Morandi.

Although the image is not strictly surrealistic, its forms elicit a kind of dreamlike metamorphosis, a latter-day Basquiat with a touch of Tanguy. We are torn between the elemental language of form—the shifting dynamic fields dictated by color, texture, and shape—and the suggestion of the most ordinary of objects, the flotsam and jetsam that wash up on endless shores, a cacophony of plastic cups, Styrofoam containers, soda bottles, balls, pickup sticks, paddles, which litter Komarin's paintings. This tension is consonant with the fundamental undertow of meaning in the painter's work, the resonance of the conflict children experience as they confront their messiness. Komarin's awkward metamorphosis of shapes and coalescing of forms thus speak to that early phase of development, when society imposes on children its "civilized" constraints of tidiness and order. The erasure and constant sense of loss of an object, either as it inverts in shape, fades away into the depths, or becomes thoroughly elided into a white blankness, as in *His Mind Like a Greek Motel*, suggests an absence that could be read as death.

Is not the essence of the compulsion to repeat fueled by the need to play out over and over the traumas of childhood? Does not the artist's tendency to replicate a form and move it from one space to another, such as happens in the unwieldy rocklike shapes in *His Mind Like a Greek Motel*, derive from a lifelong preoccupation with the fate of a man who did just that? There are many ways to view and understand the dots that Komarin literally connects for us in paintings like *That She Had Wanted* or *Mrs. Langdon Afterward*. We need not plumb the deepest meaning that his paintings reenact, nor care whether Komarin is himself attuned to the specific formative narratives that course through his psyche. What matters is this painter's vulnerability, his willingness to explore the act of paintings as a process that ends in revelations both aesthetic and psychological.