

Bending Light: Allison Malinsky's Sculptural Paintings

Throughout her career, Allison Malinsky has cultivated an airy physicality and an abstract approach to the body and landscape in her paintings. A New Hampshire-native and transplanted New Yorker, Malinsky has continued that exploration in her adopted home of Spain. A thematic focus on water, fabric, and the body remains prominent, but the light, landscape, and architecture of her new environs have increasingly informed her paintings. *Proper Part of the Whole* presents two bodies of work that embody Malinsky's new sculptural approach to painting, which allowed her to merge her interests and techniques into her most fully realized body of work yet.

The two bodies of work on view in this exhibition—*Dividing* and *Fetishes*—are best understood by taking a look at the work Malinsky has done in the past two years and how her process has developed from painting abstract interpretations of her surroundings to realizing those forms in space. When working on wood panel or stretched canvas, Malinsky painted with Flashe and oil—two contrasting mediums that enabled her to achieve a variety of surface textures. In a series of abstract landscapes from 2014 and 2015, she combined translucent and dripping washes, sketchy scribbles, and velvety gradations to create a collage of flowing and gestural forms. These paintings share affinities with the work of Lesley Vance, whose abstractions are grounded in the traditions of the still life genre. Similarly, Malinsky's work references the practice of drapery painting—a fundamental exercise in the study of painting that focuses on the process of capturing the dimensionality of form and light.

Malinsky's landscapes are not restricted to the environment but are inclusive of the body and the domestic interior. *The sun was shining* (2015) is a dense arrangement of cascading folds and soft bodies that brings to mind the ruffled and tangled sheets of an unmade bed, while also evoking the colors and quality of light particular to the Spanish landscape. In *Leaning In* (2015), a tiny flash of skin appears amid flowing cloth, and in the right side of the painting, a wash of pink bends like a knee. The fleshy section in the lower left corner of *Picking Arandanos* (2015) is a direct antecedent of the limb-like fold in her new works. Malinsky's abstracted references to the body bring to mind the nude self-portraits of Joan Semmel, another American painter who worked in Spain. In *Secret Spaces* (1976), one of Semmel's signature works painted from her own perspective looking down, her body parts become an abstracted landscape, and in *Double Torso* (1987), two sunbathers merge with the beachside landscape to form a human horizon line.

While still working on these paintings, Malinsky started experimenting with a more volumetric approach by taking the canvas off its support and transitioning from painting images of fabric

to sculpting with fabric. Her first three-dimensional fabric pieces were minimally painted or dyed, if at all, in contrast to her layered, multifaceted paintings. They are simple but elegant pieces that are titled for the time of day they represent. The nocturnal *23:00* (2013) is a piece of black crepe fabric sewn into a fanning accordion shape that catches the light and creates tonal variations in the dark cloth. A dyed piece of silk tacked to the wall, *06:45* (2013), suggests a building silhouetted against the first pink blush of morning light. These works have a precedent in Sam Gilliam's gestural painted and draped canvases, an inspiration that carries over into Malinsky's next major series, titled *Hydra* and completed in 2015.

Hydra comprises circular fabric assemblages that converge to create central slits or folded and bunched ruffles of fabric. These corporeal forms also recall Robert Morris' *House of Vetti* series, arrangements of folded and draped felt that were architectural but also strikingly suggestive of female anatomy. Composed primarily of black and grey felt with the occasional pink accent, Morris' *Vetti* sculptures are heavy and foreboding, whereas Malinsky's are vibrant and buoyant, even humorous. Malinsky's animated color schemes are not only a departure from the minimalism of her initial fabric works, but they also provide a playful counterbalance to their own sculpted sensuality. With *Hydra*, Malinsky fully embraced the unprimed canvas, which was often left exposed, as a material to be sculpted. As such, this series lays the groundwork for her most recent work—and the focus of this exhibition—which continues to develop the sculptural approach while returning to the painterly formalism employed in her two-dimensional works.

With only subtle variation, each work in Malinsky's *Dividing* series uses the same structural template—two curved and folded pieces of linen canvas with one tucked into the other—to create an elliptical shape with a central crease. This ovoid form is the result of rigorous experimentation with fabric patterns and various methods of construction. Additionally, the painted elements of each piece are meticulously mapped out and developed as maquettes before being transposed to the larger scale. Her process is strongly informed by clothing design and how cloth is transformed from a flat object to one that wraps the body. The linen templates Malinsky used for this series are comparable to the pattern for a dress or the last of a shoe.

The folds and overlapping layers of fabric in Malinsky's two-dimensional paintings may have provided the sculptural inspiration for her three-dimensional works, but they also share a visual language. In the *Dividing* series, each piece is painted with variations on elemental tones that evoke both human flesh and the color and quality of light associated with the Spanish land and seascape. But Malinsky takes it a step further and paints representational folds and shadows into the canvases that have their own contours, creating a tension between the sculpted element and the imagistic content. *Dividing 9 (Bather)* (2016) is an abstraction of sand and sea,

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a cubist confusion of painted folds and shadows that counter the actual curves and creases in the linen. More minimal works, such as *Dividing 3* and *4*, serve as studies of tonality and light, whereas *Dividing 7 (Nude Sea)* continues her usage of aqueous imagery.

The folds and implied cavities of Malinsky's *Dividing* paintings recall a series of ceramics done by Hannah Wilke. Though Wilke was not working with fabric, she rolled clay into thin sheets to create supple, leather-like skins that were folded over into vessels that also evoked flower petals. Malinsky's interest in ceramics, specifically the funky and amorphous work of California artists Ken Price and Ron Nagle, led to her most recent series, *Fetishes*. For these small works, she uses pink enamel ceramics as supporting structures for three-dimensional paintings on linen, like a fashion designer would use a dressform mannequin. In contrast to her other volumetric paintings where the framework is hidden, in *Fetishes* the ceramics are visible, providing a lustrous base for the abstract paintings. The conical ceramics resemble breasts when uncovered, but when paired with their respective paintings and installed together in a group, they read like a miniature mountain range or an archipelago of volcanic islands.

Though Price and Nagle inspired Malinsky to work in clay, their influence may be more strongly felt in the tactile sensuality of her fabric works. Both ceramists were masters of molding clay, but also of glazing to achieve a dazzling array of surface textures and tonal qualities. Malinsky, too, places equal emphasis on sculpture and painting by taking the canvas off the stretchers and into space, but she blurs the line between disciplines, challenging the eye to decipher real dimension from conjured. In her *Dividing* and *Fetishes* series, she merges visions of the landscape with bodily figures and translates them into luminescent abstractions and corporeal impressions that demand and deserved to be looked at twice—as paintings and as sculptures.

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