

Hermine Ford with Stephanie Buhmann
October 22, 2014
Tribeca, New York



Untitled (343-14), 2014
Ink, watercolor, gouache, pencil, and colored pencil on paper, 22 x 30 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Outlet Fine Art, New York

Stephanie Buhmann: How long have you been working with shaped canvases?

Hermine Ford: I started warping rectangles into parallelograms and odd shapes about twenty-five years ago.

SB: What inspired you to break away from a more traditional format?

HF: The first time I broke through the straight edge, I was focused on making a road, path or a river; I was working from diagrams of bird flyways and maps of waterways and I had made a loop that went from one side of the painting to another. I began to feel that the edges, especially the corners, served no purpose and that I was simply filling them in. I was also looking at aerial maps of the earth and ocean and there was nothing about looking through the traditional frame that had anything to do with that. There were also several other things that fed into it. I had been looking at Landsat images [Landsat satellites provide repetitive coverage of continental earth surfaces], which were thermal color-coded. Everything about these was interesting. I was looking at them for color ideas, so it took me a long time to even notice that these photographs were weirdly shaped, and I thought there might be an idea for a painting there.

SB: Would you say that this shift in your work happened rapidly?

HF: No, in fact I work rather slowly! I don't just jump on big, new ideas quickly. I think ideas are a dime a dozen. So I did quite a lot of sitting and thinking. I needed to find out why these photographs were shaped the way they were. One of the reasons was that in the early days, the camera was attached to the wing of an airplane at a weird angle in order to clear it and when it was printed flat on a map it became a tilted photograph. This concept of the tilt really interested me.

SB: Did you push the shape of the canvas right away or did you first experiment with paper?

HF: I tend to make drawings first. In those years I was drawing a lot with charcoal and I first made very large charcoal drawings.

SB: Are your drawings usually studies for paintings?

HF: Sometimes. I have hundreds of working sketches and drawings, which occasionally get more formal. My drawings do often reflect things I am thinking on for my paintings. But then I make other kinds of drawings where I set myself free from that and I make drawings as ends in themselves.

SB: Your paintings consist of differently painted segments. Their overall shape is biomorphic and in that seems to stem from nature, but these segments cite various other, often manmade, sources.

HF: Not all of my works relate directly to nature and in recent years, other sources indeed have entered in. I've always been exhilarated by wild places. That initially influenced my work very strongly. At the same time, I never wanted to make representations of nature. I remember sitting in the dunes in Provincetown many years ago and drawing the dune grass. Even then, I eliminated the horizon line almost immediately. I wasn't interested in that representational space. Instead, it was about getting so close to the perimeter that it disappeared. And even though my drawings from that time were rectangular, and the first paintings that came from those drawings were rectangular, the rectangle, as far as my experience of what I was looking at, had long disappeared. I was so close that there was no frame.

SB: It certainly adds a level of abstraction to be that close and work with a shape that immediately appears unfamiliar.

HF: Well, the latter happened slowly and appeared much later in my work. In the beginning, I was interested in all the different ways that we inform ourselves; first, by looking directly at the world, and then also by reading about it, looking at maps, looking at diagrams of things we can't actually see, such as the pathway a hummingbird takes when it flies from Panama to Nova Scotia. But in the early 70s, I made a lot of long horizontal paintings, where a single canvas was divided into three, and later five sections, with something quite different but related painted in each one.

SB: Did you think of these sectioned works as being related to film sequencing?

HF: That's an interesting question. But no, I don't think so, as far as I know I wasn't thinking about film. It was more like an "either, or, or both" kind of thinking.

SB: It was not about unfolding some kind of narrative?

HF: There was a kind of abstract narrative. To give you an idea: I had developed fields of marks that were derived from the grass growing on the dunes. Those small marks could be varied forever. The next panel would be an acidic-copper green, which was the color painted on the window trim of the grey, unpainted dune shack we used to stay in. The dune shack itself was this "natural", weathered grey, but the window frames were painted in what I always considered to be a very artificial, oxidized copper green color. I was fascinated by how this artificial green looked in the context of this purely natural landscape. So there was this friction and my questions were: "What is natural?" and "What exactly is artificial?"

SB: How did you come across the Landsat photographs?

HF: My husband found a book at the STRAND, and the images inside were already outdated by the time he brought them to me. They were what they used to call "False Color Images", because the images were thermal color-coded; they were not naturalistic photographs. This tickled me completely! "False Color Images", what does that mean? What does that say about the meaning of false, because obviously, there is something real about them. This contemplation became very important and so I used this "false" or chemical shade of green over and over again as a foil against other situations.

SB: Let's talk a little bit more about the use of segments in your work. The way you describe your early divided paintings makes me think of storyboards, which contemplate a larger theme by zooming in on its various characteristics, such as color, texture or rhythm, for example.



Untitled (335-14), 2014
Oil paint on cotton muslin on shaped panel, 72 x 43 x ¾ inches
Courtesy of the artist and Outlet Fine Art, New York

HF: That's right. I would depict the subject smaller or bigger. I would make the color a romantically naturalistic shade of misty grey and then in the next section pump it up. Eventually, I started warping the shapes, turning the rectangles into odd parallelograms, then attaching smaller, or recessed shapes to larger ones. I made these for quite some time, and the edges were always straight even if the corner angles were weird. They were always painted on canvas stretched on stretcher bars. Towards the end of this period I had started a little practice in my studio in the summertime – it felt like what practicing scales must be for a pianist. It was just a warm-up without larger intentions. It involved this collection of pebbles from our shore at our summer home in Nova Scotia that I kept in my studio. Besides being beautiful they are very varied in color, shape and marking. I loved drawing them at scale and as precisely as I could, and that dreamy, focused attention on them allowed me to see that their shapes and markings echoed everything in the surrounding landscape: clouds, off-shore islands, river bends, whales. Their overall shapes were round and smooth, worn by the water. One day I decided to make a big charcoal drawing, black and white, densely layering strokes in a rectangular sheet of paper. I loved it and made a whole bunch. Then I started drawing on paper that was cut out into shapes that mimicked the stones.

SB: These shapes were translated into painting?

HF: Yes, my round-ish paintings whose compositions contain abstract lines came from these drawings of stones.

SB: To create differently shaped canvases must have posed a technical challenge at first.

HF: I always do things in tiny steps. First, I started cutting the shapes out of paper. Then, I cut them out of plywood and my studio assistant and I would build a frame on the back for hanging. However, I never painted on wood. Instead, I laminated linen to the wood.

SB: How about these current works that are rather large.

HF: When my work got this big, the plywood became too heavy. These works are made of a laminated material, but linen is still the surface layer. I use a 4 x 8 ft. board, onto which I mount a huge piece of linen, using gesso and glue. I cut out the shape I want from a pattern, of which I have already made a life-sized drawing. Then, I have someone insert wood along the edges. Overall, there are four layers: Styrofoam, beaverboard on each side and linen. It took a while to find a solution for the edge. I didn't want the Styrofoam to identify itself and I also need to strengthen the edges.

SB: Did the more elaborate and time-consuming preparation of your support have an affect on your work?

HF: In a way it did. By the time I actually started painting I had already been thinking about a painting for quite a long time. The biggest challenge is that every summer, we leave for Nova Scotia for several months. I have to get all my materials ready and project three or four months worth of work.

SB: Let's discuss the paintings we are looking at now, which are all fairly recent.

HF: They all belong to a group that has a very specific beginning. My husband Bob [Moskowitz] was invited to be a resident at the American Academy in Rome, the winter following 9/11. I had been very excited to go and took a semester off from teaching. We left at the end of December 2001, and arrived in Rome still traumatized by the fallen towers just a few blocks from our home in New York City. To tie me over, I had brought with me a few beach stones, for comfort and also to help me get started on new work, which I planned to make in Rome.

SB: As longtime Tribeca residents your home is very close to the World Trade Center site.

HF: Although we were still in Canada on 9/11, we had a terrifying day. I couldn't find my son, who at the time was taking the PATH train from Downtown to his work in Jersey City every morning. But the whole world was traumatized and the security around the American Academy in Rome was horrendous.

SB: Had you been in Rome before?

HF: I had been there as a tourist, but only for a few days here and there.

SB: It certainly must have been a strange time to be in Rome. Do you recall one of your first impressions or something that immediately stood out?

HF: I quickly realized that the city was built from stone that had fallen down upon itself many times over. In the course of history, Rome has rebuilt itself from its own materials multiple times and this fascinated and comforted me. The earliest Christian churches were built from Roman ruins, for example and the columns in a single church can have come from all over Rome, and also from Greece, from Egypt, and other places belonging to the Roman Empire. The Christians adopted Roman ruins, materially, but also terms of iconography and imagery. They don't talk about that in modern times but it is so clear. Even the image of the Virgin Mary, the mother and child motif, has existed since ancient times. This realization fascinated me, as well as the idea of fragmentation and topsy-turvy layering of different materials from different times and places. As a consequence, the shape of my work shifted from round and smooth like the stones I collected in Nova Scotia, to some that are much more jagged.

SB: In other words, Rome's ancient architecture had this direct impact on the physical appearance of your work?

HF: Oh yes.

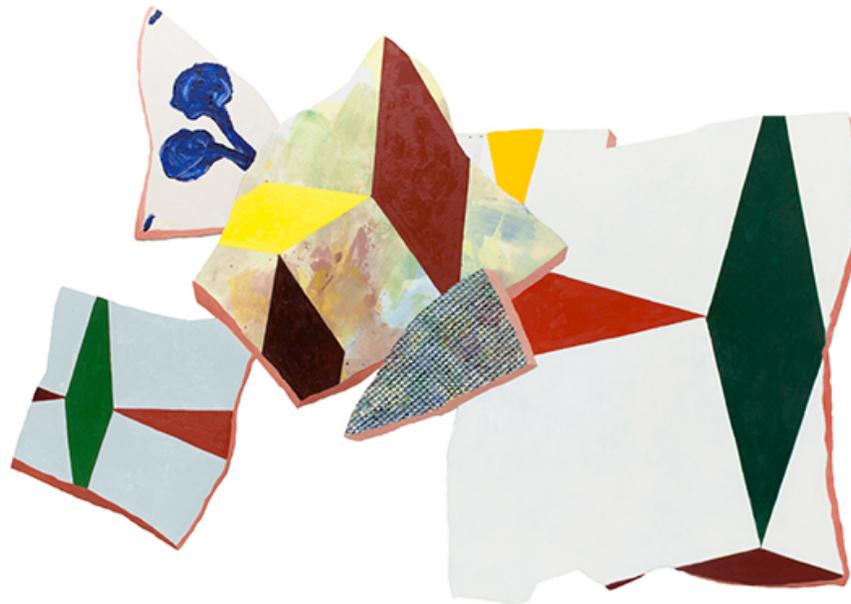
SB: It is interesting to me that you have taken much inspiration from nature but that the formal presentation of your work is primarily rooted in manmade systems, such as architecture.

HF: But I see these as one continuum. One thing that keeps amazing me is that geometric pattern-making exists in nature and that its use by people is ancient; it developed all over the world and can be found in every age and culture. The only explanation for that phenomenon is that patterns are basically derived from nature. According to anthropologists and archeologists, for example, rows of triangles reference the Wolf Tooth Pattern, mountains, or waves. As fantastic travelers and traders, the Romans brought everything back with them and a lot of what they brought came from the Orient and Africa. To me, that is very heady stuff. Part of what I am doing in my paintings is going from what we call "natural", such as grass growing on the side of a hill, to a pattern.

SB: Your recent paintings also reference patterns found on ceramics.

HF: Absolutely. Though I have been drawing from ancient pots and also using ancient fragments shown in museums for quite a while, the newest addition is the blue and white ceramic fragment. It has a personal back-story: I had a favorite aunt, who also was a painter. She lived in Paris and had a beautiful collection of not expensive, but very wonderful ceramics that she would pick up at flea markets. We used to go and visit her in Paris and everything she had was broken. As long as her husband was alive, he would paste things together. Every dish was glued together with this rivet of glue, but when he died, she didn't bother. She was a wonderful cook and

they were very lively, they had a fabulous group of friends who would come often to their modest house for dinner. A dish would come out to the table with a fabulous endive salad on it, but a quarter of the dish missing. After my aunt died, my sister took a dish that we both loved and remembered well back to New York. A couple of years ago, on my birthday, my sister presented it to me smashed up in a million pieces. She told me that she had taken a hammer to it, because she couldn't stand looking at it anymore. But she couldn't throw it out either and thought that I perhaps could use the fragments. At first, I was only interested in using the shapes of these fragments, because it is hard to invent an anonymous shape; the human mind doesn't want to do that, because it wants to organize. But then I got interested in the pattern, because it was so unlike everything else I had been using.



Untitled (333-14), 2014
Oil paint on cotton muslin on shaped panel, 43 x 59 x ¾ inches
Courtesy of the artist and Outlet Fine Art, New York

SB: To me, your work is very much about fragmentation, but more specifically about bringing fragments together in unexpected ways.

HF: I'm very happy to hear that you see these paintings as fragments that are coming together, because sometimes they are conceived as the opposite: fragments that are falling apart.

SB: In other words, the work encourages an "is-the-glass-half-full-or-half-empty" debate.

HF: A few years ago, I made a book with my friend the poet Kathleen Frasier, which was published by Granary Press. Kathleen lives in San Francisco and when we were working on the book, we were sending each other images and texts back and forth. I would send her these pictures and she would write back: "Hermine, are you OK? These are terrifying. Everything is flying apart - it's terrifying." And I would respond that yes, they are flying

apart, but that they are also coming together.

SB: To me, the fragmentary aspect of your work evokes the structure of an atom: electrons orbiting the nucleus. The elements are bound together by their common draw to the center of the composition. I don't really see them as exploding outward.

HF: Some of my new paintings seem to be falling into themselves and others are more expansive.

SB: There is a clear sense of juxtaposition in your work and I wonder if it is rooted in the unique rhythm you have created by living in one of the largest cities but spending significant amounts of time immersed in nature. Do you think your paintings indeed need the back and forth?

HF: I need that! I spent plenty of years in the city without leaving it. Then, in the 70s, we started to go to Canada for a month. In addition, we always went back and forth to visit my parents in Provincetown. We would often rent this shack way out in the dunes. Then, my sister moved to Montreal, and in the summer, she and her husband started going to Cape Breton. It was so cheap in those days for Americans to buy property there. So first we went for a month, camping. That was about 30 years ago. And it's been the great wonder of our lives. It never ceases to amaze us - how amazing it is.

SB: You probably couldn't ask for a bigger visual contrast than the one between Downtown New York and the Nova Scotia landscape.

HF: That's true. Our friends up there, whom we adore, have no idea what the New York part of our life is like. It's changed a bit over the years, but when we first went there, a lot of people did not have telephones and certainly not television. That has changed of course.

SB: Do you have Internet access?

HF: We do. We have a pretty good connection.

SB: It is incredible (and terrifying) that it's nearly impossible now to truly disconnect, no matter where you go. We talked about true and false color in reference to Landsat images, but digital technology also has the power to abstract color. Where does your color inspiration come from these days?

HF: In some cases, it's local color. For instance, if you were talking about a representational painting, and you painted the blue sky outside the window that is local color, but if you make the sky purple that would not be local color.

SB: You often seem to be drawn to earth tones.

HF: Some components are inspired by tile work, for which earth, terra cotta, and phthalo green are classic colors, for example. Meanwhile, some of my recent patterns were inspired by designs found on fabrics created by indigenous Pygmy groups in the Congo region of Africa.

SB: Could you elaborate on your interest in the Pygmy?

HF: I have been in love with all things Pygmy since I was a kid. Somebody had given me a book about a little

Pygmy boy setting out in the forest by himself. To this day I try to walk in the woods as he did, as silently as possible. Except of course when I am trying to ward off large mammals. Then later, coincidentally my parents had a friend, who married an anthropologist and together they went off to live with Pygmies in Africa. When she came back, knowing of my interest, she gave me a Pygmy stool. Time passed and I didn't think about Pygmies for many years. Then, a couple of years ago I got a call from a friend of mine, asking me to come by right away. She told me that a friend of hers had recently died, who had collected Pygmy artifacts and painted Pygmy bark skirts, which I had learned about from reading my book as a child. My friend was arranging to sell them to Harvard. I went up to see her and almost died. They fired up my imagination all over again. On my way there, I ran into a very good friend of mine, the sculptor John Newman, and he told me that he had a record of Pygmy music. He lent it to me and I also bought a book on Pygmy bark skirts, which are painted in the most beautiful, and very informal geometric designs and patterns. In addition, I re-read my childhood book. And for the second time in my life I had a love affair with all things Pygmy. This is part of what I meant earlier when I said that things travel all over the world. You could say that I basically steal things from wherever I find them.

SB: I think every artist does and has to, but only the confident admit it. It is such a cliché to argue that great art is equivalent with inventing the wheel. To me, that is simply progress, but art captures the human experience of collecting, feeling and channeling the world, including all preexistent things within it.

HF: Well put. I love to acknowledge my sources and my influences from other artists. I think we are living in a time when the whole concept of originality is misunderstood. I think people walk right by originality all the time without even recognizing it, and they make a huge deal out of something that is barely original.

SB: Besides the Pygmy patterns and ceramics you are also interested in mosaic floors. Are there any in particular that stand out as a source of inspiration?



Paris, France (321-13), 2013, 47 ½ x 73 x 7/8 inches
Oil paint on cotton muslin on shaped panel
Courtesy of the artist and Outlet Fine Art, New York

HF: Well, of course the floors of Roman churches have provided me with an infinite amount of material. But these recent mosaic motifs come from something quite different, even though ancient floors influenced them as well. This new floor that has had an impact on me is in the collection of the City Museum in Paris. On the top floor there is a complete, original art nouveau jewelry store installed. You can't enter it, but the door is open so that you can look inside. Besides all these beautiful vitrines, there is this incredible floor. I took a lot of photographs to remind me of its irregularity. There is no inherent pattern and I just love thinking of the people who were making it with no effort to organize the pattern in any way.

SB: It sounds like the works, objects and artifacts that inspire you often embody an aspect of social interaction - either in regard to how they were made or how they were used. The mosaic floors you described signify a public meeting ground; the ceramics address everyday ceremony; the Pygmy works are used in a tight-knit community for various rituals and activities.

HF: Yes, that's true. I'm very interested in the making of it and how people are using it. In regard to ancient mosaic floors, for example, this goes back centuries.

SB: Would you say that art is the summation of the experiences and passions of the artist?

HF: I think that's true for all the artists, whom I've spoken to. However, I'm not an artist who ties things to specifics. I would never say that a painting is about a dream I had last night, for example. I always thought that kind of immediate pinpointing was crazy, because it really comes from a place much further down. I would say that yes, this is all the summation of a lot of different experiences, but it is about layers that are accumulated over many years. I don't get a brand new idea that's useful to me every time I walk out of my door. I get ideas all the time, but as I said before, ideas are cheap. It takes a long time for me to find the one that's truly mine. It's accumulative, almost as if it's coming from far away and suddenly is present. To me, art making is physical. It's not on the surface of my body. The stimulus might be, but I don't think you access it that quickly.