

## A Love Letter to Nancy White's Abstract Paintings

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San Francisco, CA, Feb 12, 2020



Installation view of Nancy White, 'New Work' at Romer Young Gallery, 2020. (Courtesy of the artist and Romer Young)

Nancy White's paintings reach, for me, the platonic ideal of abstraction. Walking through Romer Young's *New Work*, her second solo exhibition with the gallery (not one to fix something that isn't broken, her first solo in 2018 was *also* titled *New Work*), I found myself sighing a lot. Not out of boredom or exhaustion, but in an unconscious and pure emotional reaction to a room of 10 uniformly arranged 16-by-13-inch untitled paintings.

What is it about these paintings? Why do they elicit from me, the stoic arts writer, the sounds of a heartsick teenager? Let me count the ways.

First, there's satisfaction to be found in their precision. White paints with acrylic on linen, but her surfaces betray no brushstrokes. She paints hard-edged zones of color hemmed in by straight lines, sharp angles and sensuous curves, but they retain a trace of her hand. There is nothing machine-like in her shapes; the nubble of the linen gives texture to the matte paint.



Nancy White, 'Untitled,' 1–2019. (Courtesy the artist and Romer Young) Photo: John Janca

If they suddenly morphed into extremely well put together people, you'd have a hard time deciding whether you wanted to be *with* them or simply be them.

Second, they are withholding. It's hard to keep from crushing on someone who doesn't reveal their whole self. Each painting practices a kind of formal restraint, limiting itself to a family of hues. The colors in her paintings, while rich, don't overwhelm the subtlety of each composition. These are off-colors, further muted by sitting alongside other shapes just a shade or two different from themselves.

When slices of color are more saturated, more easily named, like the dusty orange blob and spike that dips in from the top left corner of one canvas, it feels like a gift. A pool of crimson acts like a slight, unexpected smile that makes you blush uncontrollably. Such moments pierce rational thought. They turn my brain into goo.



Nancy White, 'Untitled,' 3–2019. (Courtesy the artist and Romer Young) Photo: John Janca

And then there's the cohesion of the exhibition as a whole. Through a repetition of certain elements (canvas size, paint type, surface texture, artwork names), the slight shifts of color and form within each of White's paintings become all the more dramatic. In aggregate, the paintings create a gradient of sorts across the gallery walls. Navy to green to red to lilac to cobalt; the paintings function like the shifts of a mood ring, changing color without telling you why.

White harnesses essential forms, rendering archways, caves, surfaces and shadows as discrete planes of flat color. At least, those are the "things" I read into her paintings, which push the viewer to imagine alien landscapes in the vein of Monet's haystacks. What does the surface of Mars look like at different times of its slightly-longer-than-ours day?

If White's paintings are windows into another world, it's one in which foreground and background are confused. Darker colors imply distance, but sometimes White's darker shapes sit before lighter ones, confusing any attempt to define a given painting's space. On each 208-square-inch surface, she uses only about a dozen different colors, yet there's so much to see and analyze in each meeting between slightly differentiated zones of color. Sometimes the paintings feel like studies in simultaneous contrast. How are we to know which colors are truly different, or just appear so because of their surroundings? I felt manipulated and I loved it.



Nancy White, 'Untitled,' 2-2019. (Courtesy the artist and Romer Young) Photo: John Janca

At one point, *New Work* had me dry-mouthed, struggling to remember the names of colors I became increasingly certain White uses habitually and casually. Was that slouching, indented curve actually ultramarine blue? Could I use the word cerulean with confidence?

But then I relaxed, stepped back to survey the gradations between evenly spaced canvases in Romer Young's white box. I resigned myself to the fact that I would never inhabit the space behind White's linen surface. I sighed. Distance makes the heart grow fonder.



Nancy White's 'New Work' is on view at Romer Young Gallery through Feb. 15, 2020. [Details here.](#)