

Sarah Gamble and the Matter of Meaning, Meaning of Matter at Fleisher-Ollman Gallery

By Matt Singer

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Matt Singer explores the deep inner reaches and outer limits of Sarah Gamble's highly focused and suggestive paintings at Fleisher-Ollman Gallery, on view now through March 30, 2019. Ultimately, the works about consciousness and matter matter, says Singer.



Sarah Gamble, Untitled, 2018. Acrylic on paper mounted on panel. 34 x 30 inches. SGAM 147. Credit: Courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia.

To these eyes, space is place, being, object, psyche, and sensibility—and sometimes all of these things all at once—in Sarah Gamble’s paintings. Nineteen of the artist’s works from 2017 and 2018 are on view through March 30 at [Fleisher/Ollman Gallery](#). Gamble’s art is proof that artists of vision are able to endlessly renew and expand the potential and promise of abstraction.

More than a century into the modernist project of placing paint on flat surfaces to explore the properties and possibilities of color, texture, and shape in and of themselves—as opposed to depicting recognizable people, places, and things—abstraction lives comfortably in the contemporary art field. In his essay accompanying *New Paintings*, Fleisher/Ollman director Alex Baker discusses Gamble’s paintings “within a broad context of abstract painting and other modes of art making that engage with consciousness, hallucination, the cosmos, cognitive mapping, and the sublime.”

Gamble has not always been—and perhaps is not now—strictly an abstract artist. It’s true that, with one arresting exception, her New Paintings are not inhabited by the figurative elements that characterized her work previously: humanoid beings or pairs of floating, disembodied eyes staring at the viewer as part of fuller flesh and soul. However, what remains evokes associations of the worldly, otherworldly, and the workings of the human brain as diagrammed and mapped by scientists. Baker writes, “Gamble presents us with what appears to be both the firing of our brains’ neural pathways (inner space) and the expansiveness and cosmic connectivity of celestial bodies (outer space).”

Above Baker’s desk is a certainly unofficial, likely unintended, but serendipitous prelude and introduction to *New Paintings*: a roughly two-by-two feet painting from 2016 (Gamble does not title her paintings, so I’ll identify them with Fleisher/Ollman’s numbering system; this is SGAM117). A pair of eyes float near the center of a layered, compact yet expansive field of multicolored dots, dashes, and glyph-like shapes within a border of polychromatic marks, all atop a variegated deep-blue background. My eyes locked with those of the painting several years ago, leaving me intrigued, a bit bewitched, and wanting to know more about the artist who made it.



Sarah Gamble, Untitled, 2016. Acrylic on canvas over panel. 24 x 22 1/16 inches. SGAM 117. Credit: Courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia.

Like clouds, painted abstract shapes can be purely nonrepresentational but, nonetheless, spark associations as disparate as the consciousnesses of those who gaze upon them. My association was specific and strong: I saw in SGAM117 a

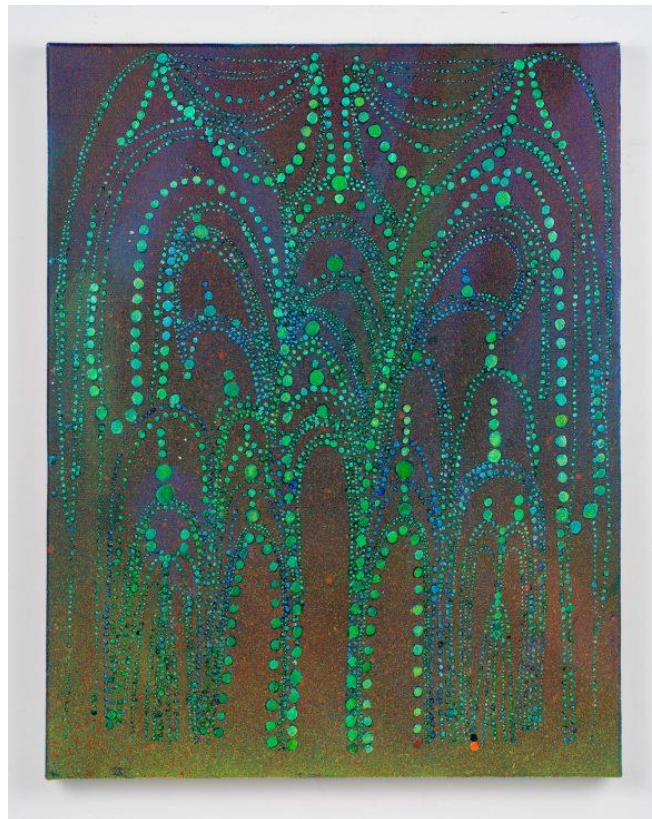
celebration of thoroughly modern metropolitan life in the 1920s. Vertical banks of white and yellow dots and dashes suggest a city skyline at night, with buildings made visible solely by light shining through windows. Nestling v-shaped glyphs conjure exploding fireworks, clear and bright-hued pinpoint lights aligned in rows suggest strings of festive lights. These luminous effects and the looming eyes brought to mind the faux-naïve American early modernist master Florine Stettheimer's simultaneously celebratory and satirical "Cathedrals of New York," a cycle of paintings completed between 1929 and 1942. Gamble's glyphs—in my mind's eye, at least—echo both backward through decades and across the Atlantic, resonating with pictographs by Paul Klee inspired by folk-art and juvenilia. But there was something more specific that I couldn't quite recollect and which proceeded to tease and tickle my memory from the moment I first saw this painting. The answer to the mystery came to me, finally, as I drafted this admiring essay. By accident or intent, Gamble had summoned an iconic American image: *Celestial Eyes*—mascaraed orbs and bee-stung lips hovering in a blue sky above a carnival of lights—the cover-art of the [1925 first edition of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*](#).



Sarah Gamble, *Untitled*, 2017. Acrylic on paper mounted on panel. 36 x 38 inches. SGAM 131. Credit: Courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia.

Leaving Baker's office and re-entering *New Paintings*, one is confronted with the show's lone engagement with the figure (SGAM131), an uncanny image that—while composed of a visual vocabulary and general approach shared with Gamble's 2016 SGAM117, the "metropolitan eyes" picture in Baker's office—is singular in a distinctly uncanny way. Visible only from the shoulders up, a gathering of figures—are they human, ape, or something more alien?—huddle closely together beneath a thick, arching line equally suggestive of containment and shelter. They are obscured behind vertical strings of white dots that flare outward and grow incrementally larger in either direction—creating depth of field without the use of perspective—in either direction as they progress down the composition. Have the figures taken cover from rain, are they caught in a net, or is another narrative unfolding? We can't know, which makes the image all the more haunting.

The works in the gallery range in scale and scope from detailed investigations committed to nine by 12-inch canvases to views of infinities that appear to push against and shoot, spread, and slip past the bounds of panels as large as 66 by 54 inches. Most settle into a middle-distance of three-by-three feet or so. All are painted in acrylic—some with underlayers of spray paint—on canvas directly or on paper mounted to panel.



Sarah Gamble, Untitled, 2018. Acrylic and spray paint on canvas. 14 x 11 inches. SGAM 138. Credit: Courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia.

A sense of the architectonic and festive returns in SGAM138, a 14 by 11-inch work in acrylic and spray paint on canvas. In a 2007 feature on Artblog titled “Sarah Gamble’s Gothic at Pageant,” [Roberta Fallon noted the Gothic](#)—or “goth,” in contemporary pop-cultural parlance—quality of Gamble’s work, describing it as “goth in the sense of Gothic (cathedrals, dark mountains, the woods—things that are overwhelmingly big, beautiful and scary). But also goth in the sense of dark night of the soul where weird devils and fanciful emanations prowl.” This painting sparks thought of a Gothic cathedral dematerialized and flattened into a single plane, its abundance of pointed arches no longer material in stone but outlined in light—an image comes to mind of Venice’s St. Mark’s cathedral festooned for carnival.

The suggestion of moodily Gothic festivities continues in SGAM125 with its fireworks-like constellation of bursting bright primary and secondary colors and radiating white dots. The image is vibrant, active, dense, and layered. Gamble has a talent for making energy visible. The artist’s own energy—which appears copious, focused, and driven—illuminates this 36 by 38-inch work and, exponentially more so, Gamble’s monumental works of some five by five feet; they are large enough to offer immersion, detailed enough for meditative study, and buoyant enough in form and color to both capture and inspire feelings of transcendence.



Sarah Gamble, Untitled, 2017. Acrylic on paper mounted on panel. 38 x 36 inches. SGAM 125. Credit: Courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia.

Gamble's mark-making is intensive and consistent across her work; one senses that this is not a way she chose to work, but a way of creating that is intrinsic to her being—that creating cosmos with dots and dashes has been an imperative since first holding a pencil, pen, or crayon. Her mark-making is labor-intensive, perhaps somewhat obsessive-compulsive. What Gamble produces is, indeed, extraterrestrial, but also speaks of something earthly, human, and everyday: textiles. At 66 by 54 inches, SGAM 139 is both a patterned and layered cosmos and a patchwork quilt with kaleidoscopic batting. Horizontally spreading diamond-shapes in shades of blue, grey, and white are pieced together and overlap above and below buttons and puffs in Gamble's distinctive green, red, yellow, and blue, and stitch-like lines of white dots far too numerous to count that radiate and cross-hatch across the entirety of the panel. The atmosphere in this and other large-scale works, seems to bring the composition in and out of focus and the viewer in and out of consciousness.



Sarah Gamble, Untitled, 2018. Acrylic and spray paint on paper mounted on panel. 66 x 54 inches. SGAM 139. Credit: Courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia.

The universe is an awe-inspiringly infinite and complex work of creation...but so are the blanket and clothes that cover you, the body you inhabit, and the mind that sparks everything you do and say and holds your every memory and hope. If I may presume to say, this is a meaning to be gleaned from the art of Sarah Gamble. Everything within and outside us is, equally, the matter that matters.

Sarah Gamble: New Paintings, *through March 30, 2019*, [Fleisher-Ollman Gallery](#), 1216 Arch St.