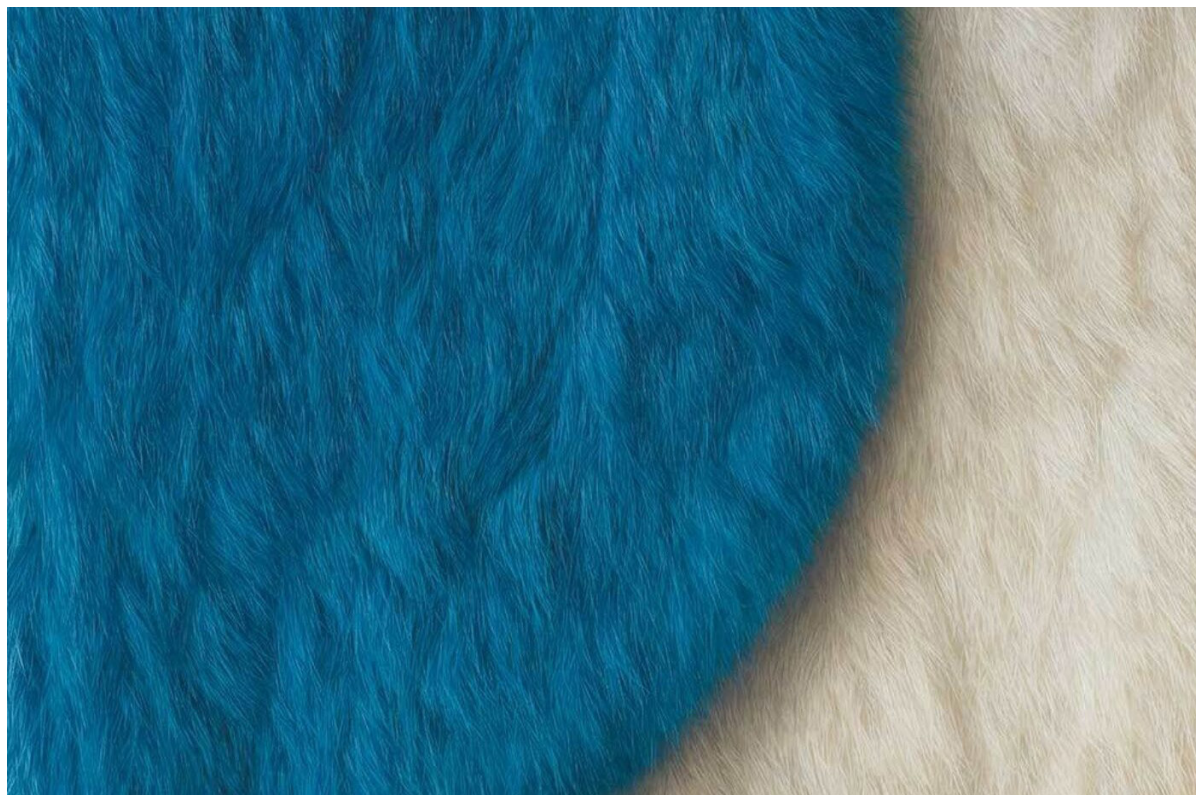


Distinct Pleasures: Victoria Gitman Interviewed by Paul Maziar

Photorealist paintings of decorative surfaces.



Victoria Gitman, Untitled, 2019, oil on board, 6.5 × 8.5 inches. Courtesy of François Ghebaly, Los Angeles and New York.

My enthusiasm for Victoria Gitman's paintings has as much to do with what I see in them as what I don't see and want to know. They have a wonderful quality of bafflement. Gitman's paintings in oil represent the tactile surfaces of handbags covered in fur or sequins. In her compositions, she edits out traces of the thing depicted in order to create an ambiguity that I find exciting. Having caught wind of her work online (thanks to the writing of Barry Schwabsky), I was left wondering when I'd get the chance to see it in person. By a stroke of luck, I happened upon some of her paintings in a group exhibition and got to meet her on opening night. It was, I hasten to add, an all-too-short conversation, and I, I laughingly admit, was a bit addled by gallery wine. What follows is my dialogue with her after a year of waiting for a second chance.

—Paul Maziar

Paul Maziar

Victoria, do you remember meeting on opening night at François Ghebaly in February 2020? Three painter friends and I had bopped around LA all day looking at art. I happened upon your paintings by chance. I was newly aware of and astonished by your work, and wanted to see it in person. What a treat that you were there, open to chatting.

Victoria Gitman

Yes, it seems like a lifetime ago! Such a different world. It was the weekend of Frieze LA, and the opening was so crowded with people coming and going, almost on overdrive. So in the midst of this, it was nice to connect with you and have a memorable conversation about the work.

PM

I've reflected on those works; they struck me as so humorous then. In a Duchampian way, they seem performative, comic, even mime-like. But your work is *warm*, as opposed to the chilly didacticism that typifies that kind of art.

VG

I think it's so great that you saw humor in the paintings; you're pinpointing an element of playfulness that's often overlooked. Although there's always been a kind of rigor and sobriety to my work, the fur paintings of the last four or five years have brought a latent playfulness and humor to the surface. The fur compositions in the Ghebaly show appeared to be striving to be hard-edge abstractions, only to fail miserably with their soft, floppy shapes. Their impersonations of geometric abstraction seem cartoonish, and their lush, sensual surfaces tease. In formal terms, this body of work reminds me a little of Mary Heilmann's paintings; they share some of the same formal playfulness. And if one thinks about it, there's also something quite absurd about painting every single hair of a fur purse. Parallel to the patience, endurance, and absorption involved in the making, there's something comic about the whole enterprise.

PM

That's exactly the kind of absurd/comic I mean. The pandemic hadn't taken hold yet when we last talked. A different world is right! Maybe that's why I want to ask you about nostalgia. The three paintings currently showing at El Museo del Barrio in New York City are based on '80s sequin jackets. What does this period bring up for you?

VG

I've been painting vintage objects for quite a while—costume jewelry, beaded purses, fur handbags—and I've never focused on a particular period. I would look for my subjects at flea markets, and later on eBay and Etsy, and I would just choose objects that resonated with me, regardless of their era. But when I started last year to look for sequined jackets and tops, I found that I was repeatedly drawn to pieces from the 1980s. There's an exuberance, a boldness, and a material heaviness to pieces from this period that really attracted me, so I began to focus my search on this decade. I can't really say that the work is about nostalgia for a particular past, but rather about a fascination with these particular objects. These '80s sequined jackets are not just rich in color and design, but they also have a density, an almost overabundance of sequins that overlap, crowd over each other, and jut out. The play of light, reflectivity, and texture creates a field where the optical and the tactile mingle in complex ways.

PM

Why might these characteristics of the heavily sequined material (shining, overlapping, crowding) draw you in at this particular time?



Victoria Gitman, Untitled, 2019, oil on board, 10 × 10.25 inches. Courtesy of François Ghebaly, Los Angeles and New York.

VG

I'm drawn by the way the shimmering fields of sequins attract the eye, yet at the same time seem to deflect back the gaze. These fabrics seem to be seductive and protective at once: they pull the viewer's gaze only to reflect it back; and their dense, hard materiality is armor-like. Whereas the fur works are all about a sensual softness, a suppleness, that generates a kind of caressing gaze, in the new sequin works the eye bounces across the surface and the resulting dynamic between painting and viewer is quite different. I've always been interested in the exchange that takes place between picture and beholder, in the seductive pull generated by paintings. My work is in many ways an exploration of this relationship and the implicit gendering that is embedded in it.

PM

However apparently plainly objective your paintings may seem, I had a hunch as to a rich content that inspired them. I'd like to ask you about the material culture that informed the new works.

VG

The objects I've been painting—vintage sequined jackets in the case of the new works, fur purses and beaded handbags in previous series—are all feminine sartorial objects covered with decorative surfaces, surfaces that are wholly superfluous from a utilitarian standpoint but are richly seductive, tantalizing both the senses of sight and touch. I've always been a kind of hyper-sensorial being, especially as it relates to the optical and the tactile, which might explain my interest in these objects, even though they're not things I would wear myself.



Victoria Gitman, *Untitled*, 2020, oil on board, 8 × 8.25 inches. Courtesy of Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

My paintings are very much focused on the material qualities of their subjects, the feel of the subjects' surfaces. In the paintings, the surface of the represented object is always parallel to the picture plane, so there's an identification of one with the other. In some of the works at Ghebaly, the represented fur covers the entire pictorial field, so the desire to caress the fur surface is conflated with the tactile desire for the painted surface. In the new sequin works at El Museo, the sequined fabrics seem to be draped over the "bare" picture plane, which is visible along the lower edge, rather than being one with it, functioning—as I touched on before—as both adornment and protection.

PM

You're having fun with formalism as well as perception. There's this importance of the picture plane and the way the sequin surface can be, as you say, a "field." Art terms and categories can be tedious, don't you think? I wonder if we might also think of your paintings as landscapes, instead of still lifes or portraits. For me, they change when I think of them like that.

VG

I seem to be so focused on surface that when you say landscape I think terrain! But, yes, of course we can do that. I think that to some extent all abstractions can be seen as landscapes. The azure fur composition that was in the Ghebaly show, for instance, is not only suggestive of Ellsworth Kelly but also of sea and sky. And the undulating surface of the fur could even be read as water ripples. I saw that association when I was planning the work, and I welcome it. I hope the paintings are rich enough that they can function on several levels and yield many readings. One of the new sequin works on view at El Museo, with deep-blue iridescent sequins and green translucent beads,

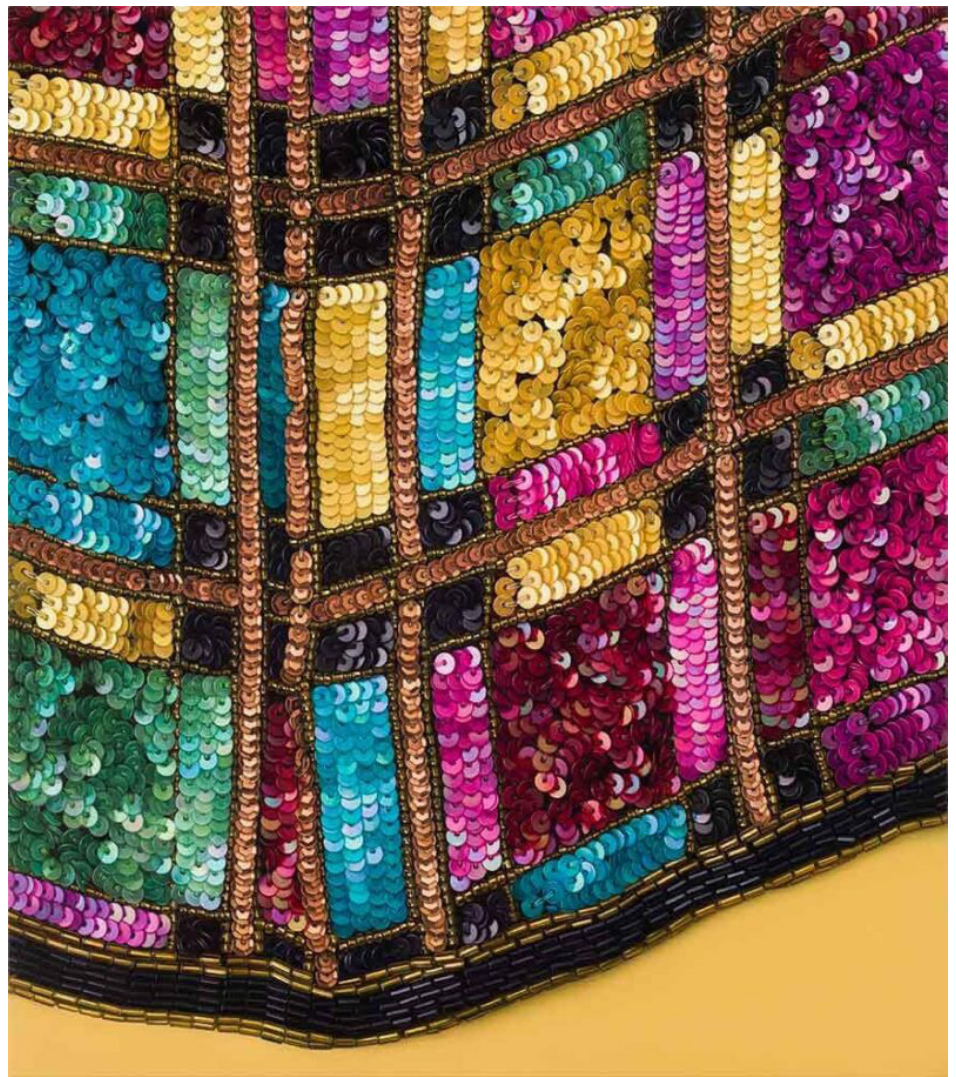
reminds me of an underwater scene. At the same time, there's a zipper running down the middle.

PM

You mention desire, touch, sensuality. Are these aspects heightened of late given the relative social isolation, the momentary scarcity of touch?

VG

I haven't noticed a direct effect of our current isolation on the paintings, though my work evolves so slowly that the psychological impact of the pandemic might register at a later point, not as a direct reference but as the effect of an altered sensibility. With the establishment of social distance as a new norm, I have thought about the intimacy that my works generate with viewers. The paintings pull viewers within inches of the surface, and the close, slow interaction that occurs feels strange at this moment, even if it's not between two living entities. At this moment in time, closeness feels newly unfamiliar.



Victoria Gitman, Untitled, 2020, oil on board, 8.5 × 7.5 inches. Courtesy of Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

PM

Yeah, I was thinking of intimacy too, seeing and hearing you reference the nearness of each sequin to another. It may sound a little goofy or maudlin, but I find a tenderness there. I love their flow (a different or new kind of sensuality) and exciting hues (I easily find joy in these), each having a satisfying

juxtaposition to another.

VG

Oh, I see what you mean! A tenderness and intimacy in the contact among the sequins, nestled together, leaning on each other, playfully pushing each other. Maybe that's the closeness that we've missed over the past year.