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Pure abstraction

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Watercolors on paper by New York abstract artist Suzan Frecon, such as such as this untitled work featuring her signature “earth reds” are on view at Lawrence Markey Gallery.
Photo: Photos Courtesy Lawrence Markey Gallery



Frecon says her paintings, such as “Study From a Painting Idea 3,” mostly evolve from previous paintings.



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Suzan Frecon's “earth reds,” as she calls them, have a depth, a vitality — with undertones of violet and overtones of vermilion — that evoke a direct connection to nature.

“The earth reds,” she said recently by email, “are the core of my palette. Color is usually the driving force behind the painting.”

Except when it's not.

“Before I begin a painting I often seem to have a concept or inspiration of color in my mind,” the artist continued. “But sometimes that's not the case. In some instances, maybe the forms come first. Or all may be in my mind's concept together: form, color, material, light and so on.”

In other words, everything.

Sixteen recent watercolors and one small oil painting by the New York abstract artist are on view at Lawrence Markey Gallery downtown through March 29. It is the ninth exhibition at Markey for Frecon.

“She's really determined to paint the abstract image,” gallery owner Lawrence Markey said of Frecon, whose work is represented in several prominent collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, the National Gallery of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. “Sometimes, the shapes connote some other form. But that's not what she's after.”

Markey, with the David Zwirner Gallery and Radius Books, has produced a beautiful coffee-table book in conjunction with the exhibition titled “Suzan Frecon paper” (\$60).

For more than 40 years, Frecon, now in her early 70s, has created abstract oils and watercolors that reflect a reverence for art itself. In conversation, she might mention Cezanne, Fra Angelico, Chartres Cathedral and Indian tantric painting.

"I think my biggest inspiration is art — in the broadest sense, including music, poetry, architecture. But, of course, I gain sustenance from nature and from my entire environment," she said. "Mostly, paintings evolve from previous paintings."

Frecon's forms, whether curving gracefully or defiantly angular, seem to relate to the space around them in an intuitive, almost instinctual manner.

"The forms are completely nonfigurative, nonsymbolic and nonillustrative," said Frecon, who had a major solo exhibition at the Menil Collection in Houston in 2008 and was included in the 2010 Whitney Biennial. "They are generated pretty much by the outside forms of the support, whether stretched linen or irregularly shaped paper."

For the watercolors at Markey, forms were influenced by the material, which is antique Indian ledger paper, with its creases and folds and holes where the posts held it in the ledger.

"Friends bring the paper back to her from India, and she is able to find it in New York sometimes," Markey said. "She just loves everything about it — what it looks like, the way it receives the paint, the folds and marks from prior use. She responds to it."

But, with Frecon, it comes back to color. Her palette, which in addition to earth reds includes indigo, sky blue, deep green, gold, bright orange and canary yellow, is the primary focus.

"The colors come through me from everywhere," she says.

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