

Artlurker
“Jet Set Saturdays: Channa Horwitz at Solway Jones and Kunsthalle LA”
Anne Martens
April 2010



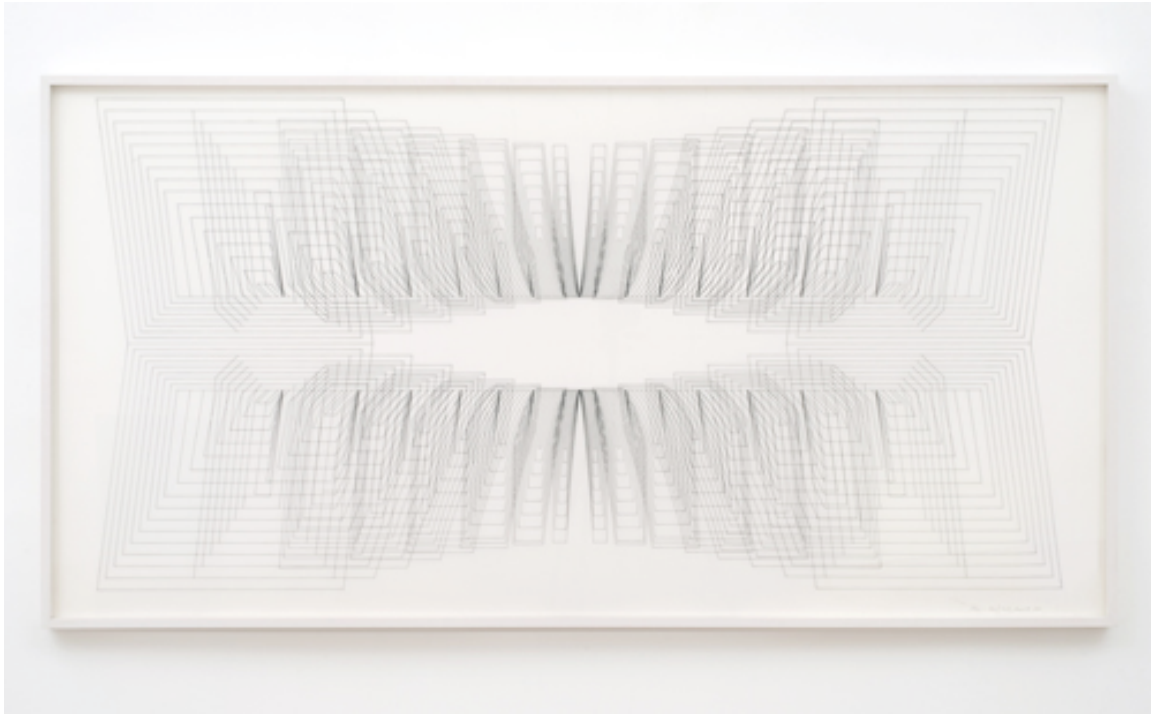
If Channa Horwitz wasn't female and 78 years old, she'd perhaps—and deservedly—be as well known as her male, L.A. artist contemporaries Robert Irwin and James Turrell. At the time of Ferus Gallery's emergence, she lived in Tarzana—then as Channa Davis—raising three children, where she created remarkable works of art. One wonders, had she hung around La Cienega Boulevard often enough, would the boys have let her in the clubhouse? This Jet Setter doubts it.

In 2005 and 2007, Solway Jones Gallery exhibited Horwitz's contemporary work. The gallery's current two-part exhibition, one at its main space on Hill Street; the other at Kunsthalle LA on Chung King Road, showcases the artist's seminal work of the 60s, 70s and 80s, as well as a piece from 2000 and one from this year. Upon a recent visit to both gallery spaces, Michael Solway pointed out a 1971 LACMA exhibition catalog in a vitrine — tangible evidence of the type of historical exclusionism female artists face. On the cover, about a dozen artist-faces, all male, stared back. Nearby hangs Davis' 1968 notated sketch for a sculpture, *Suspension of Vertical Beams Moving in Space*. The sculpture would have included eight moving parts and eight light beams, suggesting the complexity and ambition that any “Light and Space” project would have entailed. The artist had submitted the drawing as part of a proposal for an installation she planned to execute if accepted into the prestigious “Experiments in Art and Technology” program—in which artists were paired with scientists and engineers to explore perceptual phenomena—that culminated in the LACMA show. Although she was admitted into the exhibition, the more significant installation proposal got rejected.



Will Horwitz get her due when dozens of So Cal art institutions launch “Pacific Standard Time”—a showcase of the region’s post-WWII art history—next year? Let’s hope so. But in the meantime, it’s worth checking out “Sequences & Systems,” the survey of her stunning works now on view. Horwitz’s meticulous drawings—some monotone, others in rainbow colors—rely on a grid system for their structure. As rules-minded as any scientist, musician, or mathematician, she goes about making art by pre-determining what variables will dictate the work before she begins. Executed in color pencil, ink, or plaka (a milk-based paint) on graph-ruled Mylar, the early 1980s works in Solway Jones’ main gallery appear humble in their materials and simple acts of mark making. Yet they are simultaneously sophisticated in their visual beauty and planning. Angles figure prominently. Some of the works are even framed as diamonds and triangles. The most complex drawings resemble woven textiles. If you stare at them, there’s an added kinetic effect, as the brilliant lines seem to vibrate. The simpler drawings, in which single or two colors form interlocking diamond shapes, look like argyle sweaters and socks.

To understand how Horwitz’s painstaking drawings were conceived, seek out Canon #10 Expanded, a key that demonstrates how each applied color follows a different rule. For example, green is always meticulously applied at an eighth-of-an inch angle within a grid box, blue at a quarter-inch, and so on. The most striking work in the space is dated this year, but follows the canonical formula the artist set up in the 50s . Slanted Rectangle, an assemblage of drawings arranged in rows within a parallelogram-shaped frame, provide a dazzlingly hued progression that resemble a chart of paint chips.



At Kunsthalle LA, the visitor is transported mostly to the mid-seventies. Horwitz's older drawings are also grid-like, yet more varied in their visual arrangements. Like musical notation, they've been interpreted and performed as such. Composition # 8 Augmented Variation # 2 is made up of a narrow grid that runs vertically, with individual squares blocked in, suggesting the positions of notes on a staff. By contrast, in Sonakinetography Composition # 11, strips of gridded Mylar run vertically with squares blocked in –reminiscent of player-piano sheet music. The strongest work in the gallery is Eight Part Fugue 1, in which lines resonate outward in a kind of sci-fi wave pattern.

Gallery says: "For more than 40 years, Channa Horwitz has been making drawings and paintings exploring the notation of motion and time. Sequences have been integral to the artist's work since the late 1960s, when she created her seminal work, Sonakinatography, "sound, motion, notation." Utilizing an invented visual language, Horwitz's drawings, and paintings combine repetitive sequences and systems of ordering a specific set of numbers, colors, lines, and angles. Channa Horwitz has collaborated with dancers, percussionists, and electronic musicians using her Sonakinatography works as multimedia performances in what she describes as a Poem Opera presented in Los Angeles and Europe."

When leaving Kunsthalle LA to geometrically plan the rest of my Jet Setter weekend, I saw Horwitz's systems and triangles everywhere, especially in the storefront fences that had closed down Chinatown for the night.

NOTE: The Solway-Jones press package contains an amazing interview with Channa Horwitz conducted a year ago by Dominikus Müller and published in German on Artnet.

Here are a few juicy excerpts:

DM: Eight ... you always use that number in your work.

CH: That's just because of the graph paper I use. ... I chose 8 colors. That I am still using. For the light sculpture, I wondered how the eight beams would look in a given length of time, so I notated

the eight beams on my graph paper, showing ten minutes of time ... The fact that I could describe motion simply by using graph paper was very exciting to me.

Soon after I went on vacation with my first husband. One day he wanted to play tennis and I asked for permission to please stay in the hotel room and not watch him play just for a couple of hours. You know, that is the life I lived; I had to ask for permission to do anything different from the norm. "Well," he said, "You're not being very social, but ok, just two hours," So I was in my room alone with a pad of graph paper and a couple of pencils and I came up with my "compositions," Number 1, 2, and 3. And I realized back then that simply moving the little squares on graph paper, I could show anything: I could show motion, it could represent notes, it could represent color. ... They could describe words or categories. ... I felt I had discovered a new language."

So when the two hours were over I had to go to the tennis court, but I took my material with me. When no one was looking I was secretly coloring in all of the little squares on the graph paper. At some point this lady who organized the tennis games came over. I was trying to hide what I was doing from her. But she asked: "What are you doing there?" And I showed her this little square of 64 colors... and she said, "Oh, my nephew made something just like that." And I got really excited and asked "What did he make?" And she answered, "an ashtray." ... I went from this high feeling of having found a common language that spoke to all of the arts to feeling really dumb about what I had created. I had this brand new concept, but I couldn't really handle it.

DM: How was [your work] perceived [by art critics]?

CH: A critic from the Los Angeles Times wrote: "Pretty Notations by Valley Housewife." And another critic ... when I showed my work to her, said: "Channa, I really don't believe that what you do is art!"

DM: How did you continue with your work with comments like that?

CH: Because I really believed in what I was doing. And I don't need other people to say that what I do is great. I just need to believe in what I do[.]

Channa Horwitz, Sequences & Systems at Solway Jones and Kunsthalle LA is on view through April 25, 2010