

Dianna Molzan

Deconstructed canvases and layers of reference

by Katie Kitamura

Dianna Molzan lives and works in Los Angeles, USA. Her first solo exhibition was at Overduin and Kite, Los Angeles, in 2009. This year she was included in the group show 'All of This and Nothing' at the Hammer Museum, L.A. She currently has a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, until 19 June.

Dianna Molzan's paintings are frequently described as sculptural. But rather than shifting horizontally into the established register of another medium, it often feels as if her works are burrowing vertically, deeper and deeper into painting itself. The sculptural quality of the work is almost a by-product of Molzan's investigation into the apparatus of painting in its most literal sense – the wood supports, the canvas, the paint.

Molzan breaks the convention of the picture surface as single, uninterrupted plane. In one untitled work from 2009, she creates a large ledge at the top of the canvas, a weighty addition that looks like it should topple the work from the wall but doesn't. In another, she hangs a rolled protuberance across the canvas, a humble shape that recollects a door-stopper and which appears to catch the drips that colour the painting (*Untitled*, 2010).

Engaged with the material life of the painting and the gravity of the canvas, Molzan is also drawing attention to the assumptions we make about what affixes a painting to the wall in the first place. And, by extension, she dwells on the drama of presentation that takes place in the gallery, the sleight of hand and the willing suspension of disbelief. The conceit of the bare white cube, the mechanics of the hang, the sheer artifice of the gallery space is constantly gestured towards. In this way, Molzan's paintings move off the canvas and extend across the gallery wall.

These paintings act as frames. More often than not, what is literally being framed is the wall's empty surface: Molzan removes large

portions of the canvas, resulting in a series of varied and empty spaces, divided into carefully drawn grids. In some works, this appears to cage the wooden support (*Untitled*, 2010), in others reduces the stretcher bars to a bare geometric form; Molzan then paints the surface of these restructured canvases.

Despite the simplicity of the gesture, the sight of the gallery wall through the canvas feels surprisingly transgressive: an indication of the degree to which the conventions of painting are relatively fixed. Here, the painting acts as a frame not only for the gallery wall, but for the structure of the institution, the tradition of painting, the idea of an art-historical canon. Molzan's paintings feel like conundrums, in part because of their formal and material qualities (which are technically precise to the point of being confounding, the reduction of the canvas to a thread like grid, or a sequence of shredded portions, inconceivably meticulous) but also because they are themselves highly coded, referring as they do to an ongoing dialogue about the history of painting. Across a group of Molzan's paintings, any number of key artists are cited, including Jackson Pollock, Ellsworth Kelly, Lucio Fontana, and Barnett Newman.

But these citations are also highly mediated, because of Molzan's intervention with the fabric of the canvas, and because of the way those references arrive to us through the filter of design and mass culture. The paintings refer to Pollock by way of Formica counter tops, while Fontana is crossed with a pop album cover. *Untitled* (2009) features a graphic X, one leg formed by a Fontana-like slash in the canvas, the other by a bandage of pastel paint. Meanwhile, splatters of paint on another untitled work from 2009 reference the patterning on Formica surfaces; the paint drips from the canvas are a nod to Pollock, but also to the spills that take place in the more pedestrian setting of a kitchen or a diner.

Opposite page:
Untitled
2011
Oil on canvas
154×122×10 cm

Below left:
Untitled
2010
Oil on canvas
61×51 cm

Below middle:
Untitled
2011
Oil on linen and canvas
on fir
86×74×8 cm

Below right:
Untitled
2011
Oil on linen
61×51 cm

Of course, the integration of design into art, the deliberate juxtaposition of high and low, is itself a well-trodden art-historical position. Molzan's paintings are layered both formally and in terms of the complex mass of culture they evoke. The dense allusiveness of the paintings, referring to a body of experience that includes but also extends beyond the gallery, causes the paintings to function like characters of a kind. Molzan herself creates this framework: her 2009 solo show at Overduin and Kite was titled 'The Case of the Strand', referring to the narrative structure of the mystery story, and its cast of clear archetypes.

Because Molzan's 'characters' inhabit a physical space, her exhibitions are perhaps closer to plays than novels, in which the dialogue between paintings becomes something more than a conversation about the hang. There is something amusing in seeing a 'Pollock' face off with a 'Newman', but the dialogue is about more than art-historical reference. In each of the paintings – of roughly the same dimension, oriented picture-portrait style – the dense pile-up of cultural association functions as a stand in for hypothetical character's background experience; the paintings are like a material expression of the way we are buried in the rubble of visual culture. At her current exhibition at the Whitney ('Bologna Meissen') the paintings, each of which is distinct, start to feel roughly emotive – one taciturn and restrained, another reckless and exuberant.

But what is the narrative through which these characters move? Molzan exploits the theatre of the gallery space, using the classic literary techniques of expectation and assumption. Our expectations are jarred, and in this way the assumptions we make are put on display; we start to question the basic set of beliefs we use to navigate the gallery space, from the notion of an authored body of work (the conceit of the 'solo show', for example), to the idea of work in series. In Molzan's hands, the white cube is not a safe space. The title 'The Case of the Strand' is a clue of sorts – in any exhibition of Molzan's paintings, it's worth looking for the smoking gun.



