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Dazzling Gradually



The art of Fanny Sanin has an open-ended quality that allows viewers the freedom to explore the abstract elements.

By Rebecca Allan

From her inviting, well-ordered studio overlooking upper Manhattan and illuminated by northern light, the painter Fanny Sanin slides open the drawer of a large flat file brimming with decades of work. She locates the folder containing a series of studies for a painting, *Acrylic No. 1, 2015*, protectively interleaved with glassine paper. Together we unwrap and examine these intriguing visual experiments, each revealing a thinking phase in the process of incrementally solving the grand puzzle of composing a work of art. Since the mid-1970s Sanin has prepared for every painting on canvas through multiple exploratory studies—in pencil, ink, acrylic and collage—to analyze possible variations in composition, color and atmosphere. Their intimate scale, often no bigger than 12 inches in either direction, are improvisationally realized with the intention of cultivating surprise, then clarity in the resolution that she wants to achieve. The studies are then translated into untitled acrylics (acrylic paintings on canvas) or compositions (acrylic paintings on paper). Giving specific titles to the paintings would limit their open-ended nature, a quality that the artist believes is essential to the integration of the elements of painting, and the viewer's freedom to experience it.

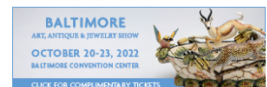
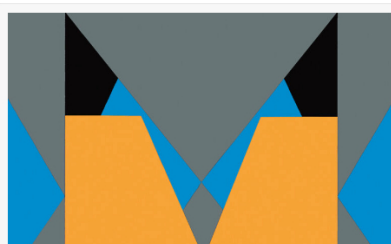


Acrylic No. 5, 1973. Acrylic on canvas.
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Museum purchase funded by the Caribbean Art Fund and the Caroline Wess Law Accessions Endowment Fund.

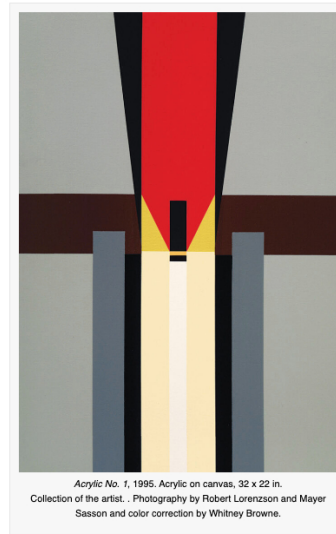
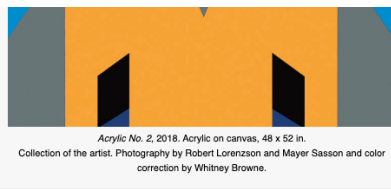
Sanin is one of the most distinguished and original voices in the realm of geometric abstraction. Her primary artistic search, for over five decades, has been to create works of art that reflect order, harmony and unity within highly refined chromatic relationships, unified by a rigorous compositional structure. Informed by her deep knowledge of art history and her experiences of living on three continents, her artworks situate themselves within a long visual tradition, from late Medieval religious paintings to 20th-century Modernism and beyond. Color is Sanin's instrument, and she has developed and utilized an inestimable range of hues in her lifetime that could never be catalogued. Through her integration of tradition and innovation, Sanin has remained devoted to the perceptual, meditative and aesthetic possibilities of choreographing geometry and color. Her paintings require us to slow down in order to see this dance and engage our minds over time. Echoing Emily Dickinson's truth-telling poem, the Colombian curator José Roca writes, Sanin's works "dazzle gradually."

Born in 1938 in Bogotá, Colombia, Sanin has lived in New York City since 1971. She is considered to be part of the second generation of

abstract artists from Colombia. The daughter of Gabriel Sanin Tobón and Fanny Sader Guerra, the artist's family home was filled with music, art and literature. To this day, music is a constant companion and studio shelves are filled with precious boxed sets of classical recordings that her father once owned. Together with her sister, Rosa, also an artist, Sanin was homeschooled and instructed in art by several teachers, including Alfonso Mateus, one of Colombia's most important abstract painters and engravers. She later studied fine arts at



the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá and was introduced to the language of gestural abstraction by Juan Antonio Roda, David Manzur and Armando Villegas. In 1960, she graduated with a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Los Andes, then studied printmaking and art history at the University of Illinois in Champaign, where her husband, Mayer Sasson McKeown, attended graduate school. During the 1960s the couple lived in Monterrey, Mexico, where she had her first solo show, and then in London, where Sanin studied engraving at the Chelsea School of Art. In 1971 she moved to New York City, where she has worked in the same studio for five decades. Her work has been exhibited internationally in more than 51 solo and 400 group exhibitions. She is represented in numerous museum and private collections, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Museo Nacional de Colombia; Museo del Barrio in New York; Smithsonian American Art Museum; and National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. She received an honorary doctorate from the Universidad de Antioquia in Medellín for her contributions to the history of modern art in Colombia.



One of the most challenging yet rewarding efforts we can make when we encounter a painting by Sanin is to suspend our natural inclination to seek out a narrative or meaning. By allowing for this, we can experience unanticipated discoveries that unfold in the process of seeing. From the late 19th through the 20th century, a primary aim for modern artists was to create equivalences of the life experiences via interactions of the elements of art, independent of a fixed interpretation.

Sanin's work is part of a longstanding tradition in modern art that elevates the pure, visual power of form and color to catalyze emotion and sensate awareness

Sanin's artistic evolution is deeply rooted in the multicultural artistic heritage of Latin America and the choices she made as an emerging artist in the cosmopolitan environment of Bogotá. There, she was exposed to an international community of artists and art movements including Informalismo (a form of abstraction that elevated the spontaneous gesture) and European modernism. As an emerging artist, Sanin admired Pierre Soulages and Antonie Tapiés. Her peers in non-figurative production in Colombia at the time included Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar, Guillermo Wiedemann, Carlos Rojas, Edgar Negret and Maria Teresa Negreiros.

During these formative years, Sanin gravitated toward a more considered and less spontaneously generated form of abstraction, exemplified by *Oil No. 3, 1966*. A stacked cluster of organic shapes arranged against a slate grey ground is painted in earthy hues of yellow ochre, red-orange and black. The shapes gravitate toward each other and converge in a circular, yellow ochre field with spiraling force. Even in this early work, the artist's inclination to infuse her painting with dynamic tension is apparent.

Working within this lineage, Sanin's influences have included Wassily Kandinsky, Henri Matisse, Sonia Delaunay and Mark Rothko. Her emphasis on finding the essence of pure color through the interrelationships of closely related variations, parallels Ad Reinhardt's black paintings and the transcendental linear compositions of Agnes Martin.

By the late 1960s Sanin imposed a firmer sense of organization using color shapes with sharp boundaries. Stripes, triangles and trapezoids, evoking Piet Mondrian's Boogie-Woogie paintings of the 1940s, appear in large canvases, in dimensions of 70 to 100 inches.

By 1970 Sanin had also transitioned from working in oil to acrylic, preferring its smooth texture, devoid of visible brushstrokes and its capacity to create precision edges. Depending upon the quality of light reflected from them, her paint surfaces nevertheless range in perception from the muted softness of wool to the shimmer of silk. Working within this lineage, Sanin's influences have included Wassily Kandinsky, Henri Matisse, Sonia Delaunay and Mark Rothko. Her emphasis on finding the essence of pure color through the interrelationships of closely related variations, parallels Ad Reinhardt's black paintings and the transcendental linear compositions of Agnes Martin.

felt to the glint of pewter. During this decade Sanin embarked on a compositions of vertical, abutting and bifurcated stripes, a device that was also used by her contemporaries including Bridget Riley, Kenneth Noland, Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly. In contrast with the Op and Kinetic artists of the period, Sanin's paintings have the effect of pacing our experience as we gradually apprehend the polyphonic color chords and organizing structures within a painting's boundaries.

Acrylic No. 2, 1972 comprises 23 vertical color bands in a syncopated rhythm of varying widths. Here, looking is play as your eyes swing back and forth across the varied widths and hues of confectionary-colored stripes. The monumental scale of this painting also imposes a deep physical sensation of space.

Acrylic No. 9, 1981 complicates this format through the introduction of intersections—horizontal bands and rectangles of varying dimension that interweave. Autumnal blocks of mauve, pollen yellow, licorice black and cherry red overlap and sneak beneath each other, meeting in a central pillar that creates a pause in this hopscotch energy field.

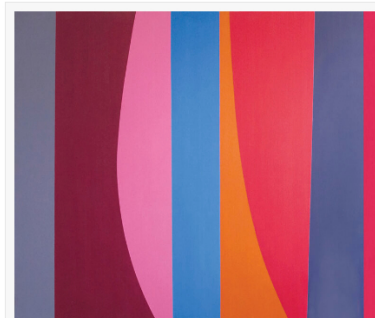
By this time Sanin's work had been exhibited internationally, including a midcareer retrospective at the Museo de Arte Moderno in Bogotá. In 1995, Sanin was featured in the Milwaukee Art Museum's exhibition Latin American women artists alongside other major artists including Frida Kahlo, Lygia Clark and Gego. *Acrylic No. 1, 1995*, one of Sanin's smaller-scaled works, reflects a sophisticated calibration of the intersecting bands of scarlet, black, cream, white and warm and cool greys. A central pillar form that flares at the top has an upward lifting energy that evokes the concrete supports and glittering stained glass passages of the resplendent Saint John's Abbey Church, designed by Marcel Breuer, in Collegeville, Minnesota.

In two works from the past five years, *Acrylic No. 2, 2018* and *Acrylic No. 1, 2021*, contrasting sensations of star-like explosion and inward reflection are generated. I think of the intersecting, geometric schemes of a charbagh, the organizing principal of Persian and Mughal gardens that is based upon the four gardens of Paradise mentioned in the Quran. As a model for organizing the wild landscape into a cultivated space, this idea could also refer to the alternating forces of effort and freedom required of a painter whose goal is to harness the elements of her discipline in order to offer us any number of paths to paradise.

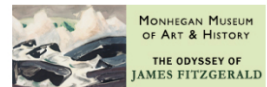
As a visual composer and unsurpassed colorist, Sanin's highly refined chromatic language has been developed over decades—the result of immeasurable hours, days, and weeks mixing hundreds of variations in saturations and tones. Acknowledging the value and significance of preserving works of art, she records and stores small amounts of each color in bottles that are carefully labeled for future reference. This very personal aspect of the painter's craft is not always apparent, just as the hundreds of studies filed away in tissue paper sleeves are still hidden from view, awaiting new research.

Critical assessment has expanded in recent years for Sanin's work. In 2011, the Fanny Sanin Legacy Project was established to promote exhibitions and scholarship focused on her oeuvre and lifelong commitment to geometric abstraction. In 2018, The Institute of Fine Arts in New York presented "New Approaches to Fanny Sanin: Women Artists and Geometric Abstraction", a symposium tracing the contributions of women artists to geometric abstraction. The program, moderated by Edward Sullivan, vice director of the Institute of Fine Arts, was presented in conjunction with the exhibition "Fanny Sanin's New York: The Critical Decade, 1971-1981". A monograph, "Fanny Sanin: The Concrete Language of Color and Structure" was published in 2019. This fall her work will be exhibited at the Aichi Triennale in Japan, the Armory Show, the new David Rockefeller Creative Arts Center in Sleepy Hollow, New York, and Art Basel Miami Beach.

In her rigorous effort to create enduring works of harmony and unity, Sanin's receptivity to new ideas and her lifelong commitment to the challenge of creating exquisite order reinforces the worthiness of forging a life of purposeful creativity.



Acrylic No. 4, 1970. Acrylic on canvas, 65 x 79 in. Museo de Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia. Courtesy of the artist. Photography by Robert Lorenzson and Mayer Sasson and color correction by Whitney Browne.



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