

LULA MAE BLOCTON

Born Ecorse, Mich., 1947. B.F.A. 1969, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; M.F.A. 1972, Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind. Medium: works on paper.

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Light, as it filters through a transparent object, and color, the consequence of this phenomenon, are the sources of inspiration for Lula Mae Blocton's works on paper. The artist describes the appearance of transparent objects through her own visual perception. Manipulating color, light, and curvilinear form, Blocton creates not only an aesthetically pleasing art form, but works in which she redefines the formal surface area of the picture plane.

Essentially, Blocton is a colorist. Her fascination and long association with color began relatively early in her life. Blocton recalls her partiality for lifesaver candies as a child growing up in rural Michigan. Interestingly enough, it wasn't the *flavor* of the candy she found so enticing, but rather the range of colors in a single roll of candy, the translucency and depth of the crystallized sugar, the precious quality of the jewel-like pieces. Similar characteristics predominate in the artist's mature work.

In Blocton's earlier work, she began by experimenting with transparent color in relation to the flat, two-dimensional surface of the picture plane. Completely eliminating perspective from her work, Blocton focused on creating quasi-intangible optical perceptions, working with oil in a wet-on-wet technique. The peculiar quality of color transparencies is such that when overlapped, the area where the transparent objects intersect will often appear lighter in color, in contrast to the overlapping of opaque color areas where the point of intersection renders a darker color. By interpreting this occurrence on the flat picture surface in two-dimensional terms, through horizontal and vertical bands of transparent color, the artist created a canvas of varied and vibrant color with spiritual and metaphysical connotations. Cross-hatching patterns utilize primary geometric shapes, yet avoid the repetition of three-point perspective prevalent in hermetic Cubist painting, instead creating the effect of a woven technique.

Blocton acquired her disregard for traditional figuration and perspective when she went to study

art in N.Y. City. The confines of urban life contrasted sharply with the wide open spaces of her childhood home in Michigan, and she became preoccupied with spatial perception, making the most of the picture plane through strict regulation of space. Blocton did, however, discover an affinity to the architectonic forms and skeletal structure of the metropolis, the interplay of verticals and horizontals, that is evident in her incorporation of primarily geometric shapes into her paintings.

Blocton eventually began to work with pastels, more sensitive to light than oils, and with rag paper in order better to explore the properties of transparent color in relation to three-dimensional space. Through the use of an oblique perspective and the manipulation of ambiguous shadow, light, and color relationships, Blocton created a highly illusionistic, three-dimensional pictorial space.

Working from a still-life model composed of acetate ribbons rather than in a purely abstract, automatist mode, Blocton's work has a tectonic quality rarely found in non-geometric abstraction. Her predisposition for vibrant, complex color and fine surface textures, however, imbue her work with an atmospheric sensibility that precludes any structural rigidity from prevailing. The shimmering surface quality of geometric yet curvilinear forms is accentuated by the presence of light which is filtered through and reflected off the transparent forms, creating areas of glimmering highlights. The occurrence of light reflected off a transparent object creates a superficially antithetical situation. One might contend that light is solely diffused through a transparent object and could not be reflected to create degrees of highlights. But Blocton questions traditional conceptions of reality and illusion, of light as an element in our universe.

In her later work, Blocton disregards the limitations of the picture plane that provided a rigid superstructure for earlier work. Instead she creates curvilinear ribbon-like, transparent forms which unravel beyond and towards the plane of the surface, creating

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infinite depth, and raising more metaphysical than formalist structural issues. Blocton sometimes includes yet another dimension with the superimposition of a skeletal grid pattern onto the picture plane, implying yet another level of depth and space. Are these forms eternally connected, or is there a beginning and an end? Perhaps this form will organically evolve indefinitely, continually receding and emerging through and beyond pictorial space?

Blocton herself says "The flow of an image on two or more canvases offers a way of incorporating and activating the space between and around the paintings. I continue to work with these ideas because the potential for exploration seems limitless." In her defiance and redefinition of the surface of the picture plane, Blocton explores the nature of illusion and reality and the definitions of spatial dimensions, using the language of modernism to inspire speculation on the spiritual.

- RUTH ANN FLAIG

Blocton teaches at Eastern Connecticut State University, Willimantucket, Conn. She has had frequent exhibitions, especially in and around N.Y. City (Soho 20 Invitational, Frank Marino Gallery). In 1993 she was included in "One Voice, Call and Response" at Insights Gallery, Seattle, Wash.; while the 1990s have included a traveling exhibition, "And This is Now: Black Art in the 1990s"; the "Wimifest" Invitational, Albuquerque, N.M.; the 5th Annual "Women in the Visual Arts" exhibition, New Haven, Conn.; "Drawing 7990," Provo, Utah; and the "American Drawing Biennial" in Williamsburg, Va. Her works are in several museums and many private collections. Blocton was a member of the Editorial Design Collective for Heresies 8, Third World Women Artists, a standard resource for women artists of color.



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Lula Mae Blocton, *Sunrise/Sunset*, 1992, oil triptych, 48 x 150" w.

