

Al Harris-Fernandez: Abstracted



October 9, 2021 – January 9, 2022





Icons and Lines #16, 2019, Acrylic on canvas, 12 x 12 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Al Harris-Fernandez is a painter's painter. Painting is a daily intuitively responsive practice that Harris-Fernandez consciously committed to years ago. Now that he has retired from a career dedicated to administrative commitments, Harris-Fernandez has even more time to devote to painting and he does just that, obsessively continuing a practice he began decades ago as a graduate student in Texas and New Mexico. The ideas for the extended body of work in Harris-Fernandez' retrospective, **Abstracted**, germinated when he was in graduate school where he began working on small sculptures similar to the pieces on view in this exhibition. Discovering the bandsaw and glue gun, he would make all sorts of shapes with the bandsaw, glue them together, then cut them apart and re-glue them, delighting in the process of unmediated

discovery this practice afforded. The unexpected shapes he created provided inspiration for the cast bronze sculptures – which in turn inspired the paintings that appear in the current exhibition. The painting *Icons and Lines #16, 2019* directly references the sculpture featured in the installation.

For Harris-Fernandez, serious play is the only option in approaching his daily painting ritual. Thinking about his work as play and experimentation, the artist clarifies his embrace of the idea of contradiction: "Play is serious; it's a struggle until I get there; I don't know until I get there. I switch between simple and complex ideas, adding and taking away – rejecting seriousness." The artist sees his work not as separate series but as images crafted



July 21, 2019 (2017-2018), Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist

in a continuation from when he began until the present, culminating in this exhibit at the Sioux City Art Center. The painting and subsequent reflection will continue.

My goal is to create images that I find absorbing. By this I mean images that are ambiguous, not predictable, that are able to surprise me, and take on a life of their own. My methodology combines intuition and reflection and approaches the canvas from all directions. Literally, I paint, then rotate the canvas, then paint again, then rotate again. During this process I continually paint over areas, allowing parts of the previous image to remain, thereby creating unexpected but intriguing new relationships. At some point during the process, I arrive at the final

orientation of the painting, the top and bottom of the image. What I find intriguing in painting is how we interpret the formal qualities of mark-making on a flat surface as referencing three-dimensional space. While I invite the unexpected, I also spend a lot of time analyzing my work and deciding what to allow and what to adjust.

Harris-Fernandez is at heart a slyly subversive formalist, finding form in nonrepresentational imagery. He moves paintings around and around, adding layers of paint until he knows they are finished, if they ever really are, he says with a slight smile and a twinkle hovering around his eyes. The ideas Harris-Fernandez embraces emerged out of Abstract Expressionism, the post-World War II art



September 28, 2020, Acrylic on canvas, 12 x 12 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Azure Court, August 8, 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist

movement primarily championed in this country by New York City artists whose paintings were characterized by the artists' interest in spontaneous creation, energetic composition, and gestural paint application. The mid-to-late-1940s through the 1950s represented a pivotal movement in Modernism, the avant-garde's rejection of traditional representational or figurative art. Rather, the emphasis was on color, composition, emotion, and elevating process over the appearance of the finished work. Interested in the writings of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, the artists declared that their canvases reflected their individual psyches, at the same time attempting to tap into universal inner sources, valuing spontaneity and improvisation. Subsequent generations of artists were deeply influenced by the early Abstract Expressionists

and went on to create their own expressions based on, but certainly not imitative of, their predecessors.

Harris-Fernandez acknowledges his roots. He is inspired by Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, and the not-as-famous William Baziotis, with his more modest-size canvases and biomorphic imagery, and, of course, Philip Guston, who Harris-Fernandez identifies as a major influence, Guston is best known for his incisive, cartoonish paintings and drawings ranging in subject matter from everyday scenes to political satires. Guston often positioned vibrant groupings of shapes and lines against subdued backgrounds of pinks and blues, colors that are prominent in many of Harris-Fernandez's canvases, such as *Azure Court, August 8, 2016*. Like



Complex #3, 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Guston, Harris-Fernandez' work is messy, it's not intended to be "perfect."

Harris-Fernandez is interested in psychological abstractions, what the paintings mean to him. Honestly, he doesn't give a hoot about the viewer's perceptions beyond a general curiosity about how they might interpret the work should they care to share ideas in conversation. Harris-Fernandez is interested in painting because painting has a body: it's texturally visceral, and he thinks deeply about applying paint to a surface to see what happens physically. For the artist, painting is like alchemy—the alchemy of the elements of art. Each of his paintings displays an energetic gestural imagery that is primarily abstract, even when the surface references tangible

visual reality. These associations are evident in the subtle relationships between the paintings and the sculpture; both display more-or-less geometric shapes, floating dots, deliberate marks, and intersecting lines that could be, possibly, structural, obviously more so in the small standing sculptures. *Complex #3, 2016* is a good example of constructing the appearance of three-dimensional form on a two-dimensional surface.

Harris-Fernandez works with, mostly, a muted palette and an occasional outburst of color as seen in the exuberant blues and deep maroons floating out of the burnt ochre in *December 5, 2020*. The surfaces of his paintings are glazed with a satin finish, and he employs scumbling or applies lighter colors over darker paints. In the *Heaven*

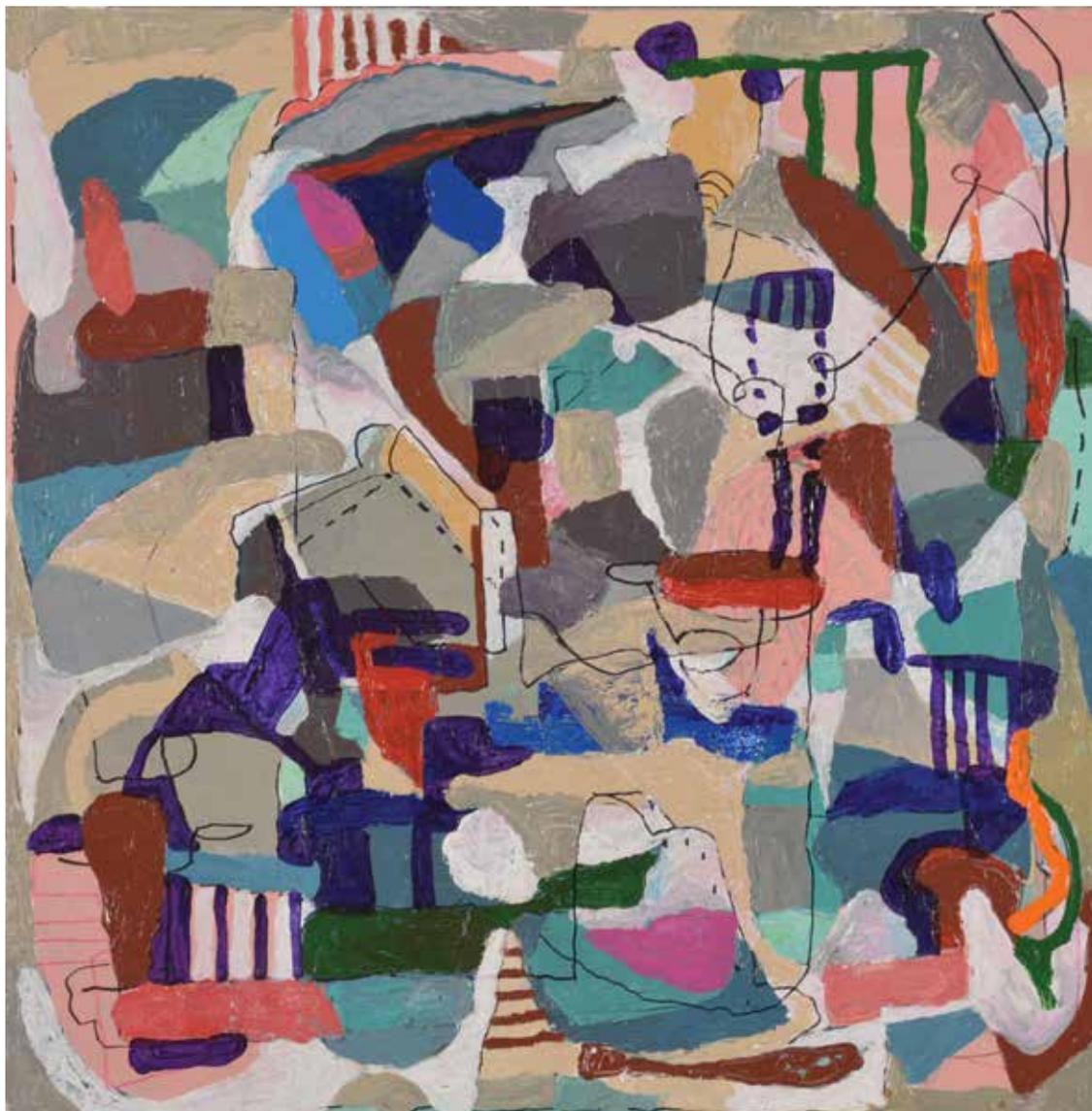


December 5, 2020, Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 inches

Courtesy of the artist



May 30, 2020, Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 inches
Courtesy of the artist



April 18, 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 inches
Courtesy of the artist



March 12, 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist

paintings, he often uses various shades of pink, which creates an interesting psychological tension: pink typically references sweetness, romance, the innocence of youth, good health, a certain delicate softness. And yet, the pinks of the *Heaven* paintings provide a background; they are obscured, painted over with other, darker colors and heavy lines. Harris-Fernandez has continued to work through variations within the compositional framework he set for his *Heaven* series, leading to greater complexity in the paintings' spatial arrangement. What might have been heavenly becomes problematic, heavily nuanced, and darkly layered, as evidenced in *March 12, 2021*.

Values are much more important than color. According to the artist, value—the formal qualities of light and shadow,

or the darkness or lightness of any given color—is the most important part of a painting. Harris-Fernandez uses value subtly to define space and texture. Colors are secondary. The painter uses the Noir app on his smart phone when he paints; he photographs the paintings and then changes them to gray scale to understand the relationship of the values. He also has a special pen to manipulate the digital file and draw lines on the images on his phone, which he can then transfer to the painting in real time. The use of digital technology brings a new twist to “action paintings,” a term first used in 1952 by the critic Harold Rosenberg to emphasize that the artwork was not merely a painting but an *event*. Moving between a small screen and a larger canvas to emphasize the physical act of painting, whether a grand gesture or a small movement,



March 24, 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 60 inches
Courtesy of the artist

is an essential part of the finished piece. Traditional action paintings foregrounded the gesture, the direct, instinctual mark-making of the artist engaged in a dance with the canvas (think of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings). Action paintings were dynamic, spontaneous, vigorous, unfettered personal expression.

For Harris-Fernandez, moving between a small screen and a larger canvas to emphasize the physical act of painting, whether a grand gesture or a small movement, is an essential part of the finished piece. Using 21st century technology allows a different sort of pre-visualization; it creates a different sort of creative dance. Every inch of Harris-Fernandez's surfaces is fully charged, even exuberant. Unlike many of the large-scale paintings by the

Abstract Expressionists, Harris-Fernandez's work is not monumental, varying in size from the intimate to the largest painting in the exhibition, *March 24, 2021*, modest in comparison to the "grander is commander" way of thinking. To fully engage with the artwork in **Abstracted**, the viewer must participate in their own dance, moving closer and farther away from each piece, adjusting to the rhythms and scale, delighting in the colors, and becoming absorbed in the inner reverie each creates.

Mary Anne Redding
Exhibition Curator



October 12, 2020, Acrylic on canvas, 12 x 12 inches
Courtesy of the artist

cover: Installation view, from l to r: #5, 1989; #31, 1989; #10, 1989; #20, 1989, Cast bronze, Individual works range in size from 4 x 4 x 4 inches to 23 x 4 x 4 inches.
Courtesy of the artist