

ARTFORUM

DEBORAH REMINGTON KIMMERICH

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Deborah Remington, *Essex*, 1972, oil on canvas,
95 × 66".

This selection of sixteen works produced between 1972 and 1982 — four canvases, eleven drawings, and one oil study on paper — was the first exhibition in Germany of the American painter Deborah Remington, who died in 2010 at the age of seventy-nine, and was organized by Jay Gorney. Born in New Jersey, Remington moved to San Francisco in the early 1950s to study at what was then the California School of Fine Arts—later the San Francisco Art Institute—where Clyfford Still and Elmer Bischoff were among her teachers. Becoming part of the Beat scene, she was the only woman among the founders of the legendary Six Gallery, where Allen Ginsberg first read “Howl” to a public audience. In 1955, she left for two years in Asia, studying classical calligraphy in Japan. Her work of the 1950s and early ’60s evinces strong Abstract Expressionist influences, but starting around the time she settled in New York, in 1965, she began to devise a distinctive, coolly hermetic visual language of her own.

The work she created there blended organic forms with a peculiar technological cast. With their deftly placed backlighting effects, these pictures, dating from an era long before personal computers, seem to prefigure something we might now see on a screen: Rectangles are warped into pillowy shapes hemmed by hypnotically lucid contours, with hyperrealist smooth surfaces executed in a characteristically austere palette. Beyond meticulously rendered black-to-white gradients, the spectrum is dominated by radiant colors such as signal red, blue, and cadmium green. For the remaining decades of her life, Remington's art would articulate a rigorous compositional vision that she pursued with tenacious precision.

The exhibition in Berlin brought out the exceptional suggestive force of her painting in works such as *Essex*, 1972, the earliest as well as the largest canvas in the show, with its numerous overlapping forms staggered in an equivocal nod to illusionism. The center of the composition is taken up by a tall and narrow element set off by red contours (it might be a cloudy mirror or else the vacantly abstract representation of a painting) framing a gradual transition from gray along the bottom edge toward white at the top. The blankness of this central form is like a metaphor, seeming to offer a picture within a picture that voids representation even as the surrounding composition also proffers a discourse on vacant pictures. Color is strictly confined to the contours: Narrow red, blue, and green bands demarcate the various fields, often edged in white to heighten their luminosity. Excrescences toward the top take on an organic quality, with painted lighting effects hinting at spatial depth. In later works such as *Auriga*, 1980; *Elatea*, 1981; and *Stria*, 1982, Remington elaborated on such suggestively (and contradictorily) orchestrated lighting, in levitating and even more forcefully planar compositions of stunning plasticity.

In the "Trace Series" drawings, 1978–80, Remington experimented with combinations of elements similar to those that appear in her paintings: window-like frames, amorphous fields, finely dotted or smooth gray scales, all sparingly arranged in specific constellations—now entirely without color. To Remington's eye, however, different hues remained in play; calligraphy, she once said, "really inculcated a sense of black and white and gray, so drawing doesn't have to have color for me. The Japanese would always say, 'Can't you see the color there in the black and white?' It's implied, and if you're a really good artist and if the paintings are wonderful enough and if they really sing, then the viewer gets a sense of color." Indeed, these elegant drawings lack for nothing.

—Jens Asthoff