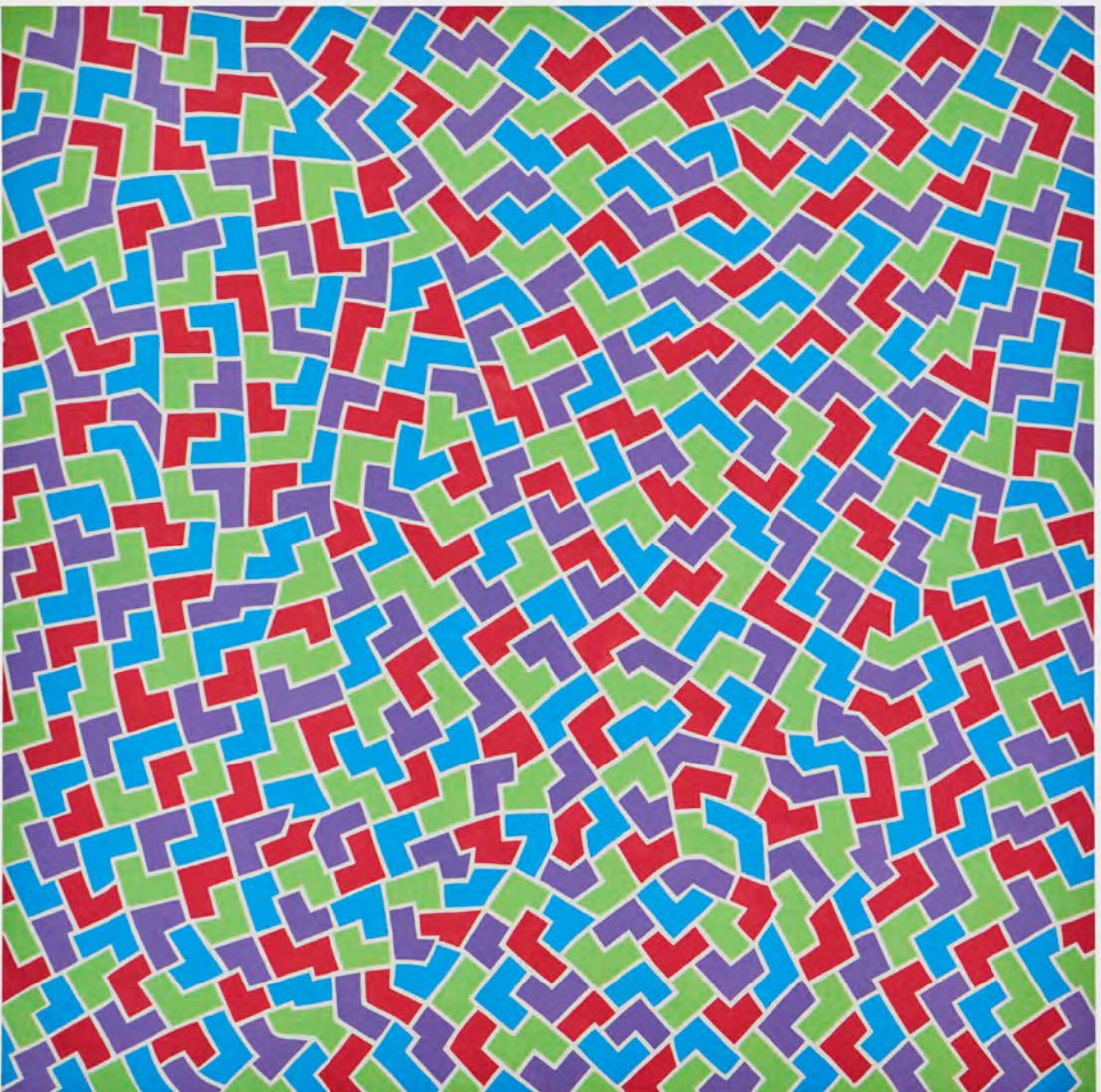


Rosemarie Castoro: Paintings 1964-1966



You’ve Come a Long Way, Castoro  
by Rachel Stella

Intervals on memory lane are measured in both space and time. It was only a few blocks from Judd Foundation that Rosemarie Castoro (1939–2015) kept the canvases in *Paintings 1964–1966* rolled up and unseen. From 151 to 101 Spring Street is a distance of about two hundred meters and almost fifty years.

Rosemarie Castoro grew up in a working-class Italian American neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. Depending on her interlocutor, she could retrieve the local accent of her youth as easily as De Niro, DeVito, or Pacino. In 1957, she enrolled in Pratt Institute’s evening program to earn an associate’s degree while working full-time. When Pratt inaugurated a baccalaureate program in fine arts in 1960, Castoro transferred, obtaining her BFA with honors in 1963. During her studies she created choreographies and became president of the school’s dance workshop as well as the theater workshop. After graduation, she “made a choice between the dance world and the art world, autonomy and immediacy winning over rental studio space and hunting for dancers.”<sup>1</sup>

The five paintings on view are among Castoro’s earliest fully realized efforts as a painter. Not one was exhibited publicly during her lifetime.<sup>2</sup> They are executed in acrylic, not oil. Easy to clean up and without lingering smell, acrylic is appreciable when your studio is the space between the living room and the kitchen in a parlor apartment, as Castoro described her first workplace.<sup>3</sup> A typed narrative in Castoro’s papers recounts: “In 1965, 7-foot square paintings, the largest size canvas I could stretch and paint in a brownstone parlor apartment, were shown to Jill Kornblee. She offered to exhibit them. I was developing fast and furious and wanted to show whatever paintings were finished at the time of the show. We couldn’t come to an agreement. I wasn’t yet ready for the art market.”<sup>4</sup>

Three paintings treat the picture plane similarly, as an animated field. Created within a few months of each other, each nonetheless belongs to a distinct series. Castoro worked her motifs in series, experimenting with variations of color and scale to obtain specific retinal experiences. *Green Black* and *Red Blue Green Purple* are signed on the back and dated 1964, while *Blue Gold Interference* is dated 1965.

*Green Black* uses small, interlocking, organic shapes to interfere optically with a solid green ground. These shapes are bounded by black paint. Similar shapes, also outlined in black, react with a solid brown ground in *Brown Black*, a seven-by-seven-foot painting also from 1964. In the smaller (forty-eight-by-sixty-six-inch) *Easter Sunday Fugitive* of 1965, red organic shapes are contoured with a darker shade of red rather than black. Castoro suggested that cobblestone paving inspired the composition of this series of works. The interlocking polygons in *Red Blue Green Purple* are bounded in white and, for the most part, are L-shaped or V-shaped. They belong to a series of canvases that investigate color permutations. There exist at least half a dozen paintings from 1964 in which Castoro experimented with polygon tiles of three, four, or five contrasting colors bound by white or colored outlines. As for *Blue Gold Interference*, several paintings from 1965 display the same strategy of shard shapes on a field of contrasting color, including *Orange Green Blue Interference* and *Green Cerulean*.

In 1966, Castoro moved into 151 Spring Street, an empty building in a deteriorating Manhattan area built around failed or failing light industry. After fifty years of gentrification, the neighborhood is now an affluent historic district called SoHo, full

of upscale boutiques. At the time it was known as Hell’s Hundred Acres. Castoro signed a lease for a space so bereft of amenities that the landlord told her he wouldn’t have let his daughter rent such a dump. Being the first artist willing to homestead such a building, she was able to rent the space of her choosing. She opted for the top floor, which had lower ceilings than the other lofts because of the sloped roof and, by the same token, private access to an outdoor space with a 360-degree view and some urban gardening potential. A decade later it was a free, if not conservation grade, storage space for sculpture, and the “place” in Andresian terms, of *Panther Pee*, a series of conceptual art pieces made in collaboration with her great dane.

Castoro lived and worked at 151 Spring Street for the rest of her life. Over time, she adapted this polyvalent home-studio space to her creative needs. It was in turn or simultaneously a studio, a darkroom, a welding shop, an editing suite. As a hangout, it was famously portrayed in Hollis Frampton’s 16 mm film *Artificial Light* (1969), which depicts friends chatting, drinking, smoking, laughing.<sup>5</sup> One of Castoro’s paintings appears intermittently in the background, perhaps *Brown/Brown Y* (1965–66), although it is impossible to be certain since the film is in black and white.

*White Ground Over Tan* and *White Yellow Raw Interference* were among the first works Castoro executed at 151 Spring Street. They are part of a series of works using colored-pencil lines to delineate bands of raw canvas, which crisscross the picture plane like lattices. A related work, *Brown Ochre Interference* (1966), was the first painting by Castoro to be reproduced in an art magazine. It leads an article in the November 1966 issue of *Artforum* by E. C. Goossen titled “Distillation.” This text accompanied a joint exhibition of the same name in the Stable and Tibor de Nagy galleries that Goossen curated. His show marks Castoro’s debut in the New York art world, and one of the only occasions in her lifetime that a painting of hers was to be seen in a mainstream gallery.

This is not to say that Castoro was an also-ran, disappearing from the scene after a few promising showings. In 2017 a museum finally gave her a monographic exhibition (*Rosemarie Castoro: Focus at Infinity*, Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona). Curator Tanya Barson’s efforts to situate Castoro in the same cultural context as her more famous peers was duly hailed. Alas, that context was described as “Minimalism and Conceptualism in the U.S., circulating at the heart of the avant-garde in New York.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, the many early paintings in the MACBA show were not discussed in the actual context of their invention, but with a dissonant attention to the works Castoro created after she rolled up all her paintings and put them in storage, never to show them again.

Castoro certainly belongs to this generation of artists, who rejected angst, raw emotion, or mysticism as the basis of painterly expression, renounced symbolism and metaphor, and were generally skeptical about subjective content. But isolated from anachronistic discourse, Castoro’s paintings ineluctably welcome comparison to a whole other group of contemporaries, the older artists showing and being reviewed during her formative years.

Goossen’s case for including Castoro in *Distillation* focused on her rational and plotted structure, “which leaves her free to explore the sensuous possibilities of color.”<sup>7</sup> These are some of the qualities William C. Seitz defended in his presentation of *The Responsive Eye* at The Museum of Modern Art in 1965. He curated the section devoted to “The Color Image” with Paul Feeley’s *Alniam* (1964) and Ad Reinhardt’s *Red Painting Number 7* (1952). Castoro’s *Green Black* would fit comfortably between them, just as the interlocking polygons in *Red Blue Green Purple* stand up to Victor Vasarely’s collage *Orion MC* (1963), a reminder that some of



Castoro’s interlocking shapes were based not on drawings, but collages (for example, *Purple Collage* and *Blue Collage*, both of 1964). In the same essay, Seitz found Kenneth Noland’s paintings worthy because they minimize the importance of the frame thanks to their areas of bare canvas and dematerialization of the picture surface. His judgment: “The color elements, their forms so diagrammatic as to be unobtrusive, are given maximum freedom of operation in every direction.”<sup>8</sup> One could say as much for Castoro’s *White Ground Over Tan* and *White Yellow Raw Interference*.

But why call upon Goossen and Seitz for critical insight when we can channel one of the most incisive critics of the period—Donald Judd himself? Tailgating Hilton Kramer’s introduction to the seventh annual *Arts Yearbook*, in the lead essay of the section “New York Now,” Judd gave his opinion of the 1963–64 season. Stuart Davis (1892–1964) was still alive when the volume went to press, and Judd evoked the steady influence of his work, praising the “dry, hot quality of the surface and the color” even as he notes in the same paragraph that “Albers’ work has been quietly influential too.”<sup>9</sup> This is the New York scene in 1963, the year Castoro obtained her BFA. Josef Albers had just published *Interaction of Color*. His huge mural *Manhattan* (twenty-eight by fifty-five feet), composed of mesmerizing black, red, and white rectangles, was installed in the new and much-discussed Pan Am Building adjacent to Grand Central Terminal. It would have been hard to miss for any New Yorker seriously interested in abstract painting. The Museum of Modern Art’s *Americans 1963* exhibition also paid attention to hard abstractionists like Richard Anuszkiewicz, whose *Plus Reversed* (1960) uses small repetitive shapes to fill and flatten the picture plane, and Ad Reinhardt, whose pithy statements in the catalogue were as much part of the discourse as his paintings. According to Judd, “Most of the best painting has got to the point where it is nearly flat and nearly without illusionistic space. The majority of Al Jensen’s paintings are completely flat. They depend entirely

on the texture, the color, and the complex patterning. Noland’s paintings have a little space. The positions and the colors of the bands, the centered scheme, and the flatness of the unprimed canvas reduce the depth of space considerably; there is less space than in Rothko’s or Pollock’s paintings.”<sup>10</sup>

To eschew illusionistic space requires qualities of orderliness, coherence, and disciplined brushwork found in Castoro’s paintings. She wasn’t following Judd’s advice in the 1960s to deploy them. But the work does feel at home in the Judd Foundation. 151 Spring Street to 101 Spring Street—it’s a matter of critical distance.

1 “Pratt,” January 2011, photocopy in “Castoro” of Barbara Rose’s artist files.  
2 In 2014, a year before Castoro’s death, Anke Kempkes was the first dealer to express interest in the work from the 1960s. She showed paintings from these series at the Broadway 1602 gallery in New York.  
3 Another description of the apartment at 13 Willoughby Avenue in Brooklyn can be found in Benjamin Buchloh’s preface to Carl Andre and Hollis Frampton, *12 Dialogues 1962–1963* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1980).  
4 “Castoro/Biography,” undated (ca. 1990), photocopy in “Castoro” of Barbara Rose’s artist files.  
5 P. Adams Sitney described the film as variations on a single filmic utterance twenty times. The utterance is a series of portrait shots of Robert Huot, Twyla Tharp, Lee Lozano, Carl Andre, and Rosemarie Castoro.  
6 From the press release for *Rosemarie Castoro: Focus at Infinity*, Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, November 9, 2017–April 15, 2018.  
7 E. C. Goossen, “Distillation,” *Artforum* (November 1966), 33.  
8 William C. Seitz, *The Responsive Eye* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1965), 12.  
9 Donald Judd, “Local History” (1965), in *Donald Judd Writings*, ed. Flavin Judd and Caitlin Murray (New York: Judd Foundation/David Zwirner Books, 2016), 124.  
10 *Ibid.*, 130.

*Rosemarie Castoro: Paintings 1964–1966*  
101 Spring Street  
April 20–June 24, 2023

Public hours:  
Thursdays, Fridays & Saturdays  
1:00–5:00pm

*Rosemarie Castoro: Paintings 1964–1966*  
is made possible with support  
from Thaddaeus Ropac gallery.  
Additional support provided by  
Catherine Walsh.

#### Exhibitions

The Museum of Modern Art,  
New York  
*Body on the Line*  
On view through summer 2023

MAK Contemporary, Vienna  
*Land of Lashes*  
May 24–October 1, 2023

#### Programs

Wednesday, May 10  
Conversation between  
Yvonne Rainer and Wendy Perron  
at 101 Spring Street.

#### Photo Credits

Installation view *Rosemarie Castoro: Paintings 1964–1966*, April 20–June 24, 2023, 101 Spring Street, Judd Foundation, New York. Photo Timothy Doyon © Judd Foundation. Art © Estate of Rosemarie Castoro. Courtesy Thaddaeus Ropac gallery, London • Paris • Salzburg • Seoul.

#### Exhibition Checklist

*Green Black*, 1964  
Acrylic on linen  
71<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 71<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches  
(182.6 cm × 180.7 cm)

*White Ground Over Tan*, 1966  
Acrylic and Prismacolor pencils  
on canvas  
57<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 96<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches  
(146.7 cm × 245.7 cm)

*Blue Gold Interference*, 1965  
Acrylic on canvas  
87<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 96<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches  
(222.9 cm × 246 cm)

*Red Blue Green Purple*, 1964  
Acrylic on canvas  
84 × 83<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches  
(213.4 cm × 212.7 cm)

*White Yellow Raw Interference*, 1966  
Acrylic and Prismacolor pencils  
on canvas  
72 × 143<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches  
(182.9 cm × 364.5 cm)

Rosemarie Castoro (1939–2015) formulated her unique artistic idiom within the context of Minimalist and Conceptual art in 1960s New York, sharing a SoHo loft with ex-husband and fellow artist Carl Andre that became a social hub for creatives, including Lawrence Weiner, Richard Long, and Sol LeWitt. While studying graphic design at the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, she became involved with the New Dance Group and later appeared in several performances with famed Minimalist choreographer Yvonne Rainer. Defying easy categorization, Castoro called herself a ‘paintersculptor’, and a dancer’s awareness of space informed her works, emphasized in the performative Polaroids she took of herself interacting with them in her studio.

From 1964 onwards, Castoro created systematic works exploring color and structural compositions in highly innovative experimentations, like her *Y-Unit*, *Interference*, and *Inventory* paintings and drawings. In 1968 – a time of political unrest in the United States – Castoro abandoned color and started to engage with Conceptual art, street works, concrete poetry and Post-Minimalist sculpture. From the 1970s until the final years of her life, Castoro focused on sculptural experimentation, creating organic shapes that represented a parallel to the experimentation of Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois. Castoro had a tendency to blend media, investing her works with a bodily dimension that is rarely present in the mathematical principles underlying Minimalism. Neither wholly Minimalist nor a self-avowed feminist, her work transgressed boundaries and metamorphosed into an erotically charged language that communicates a sense of empowered female identity. The famed feminist critic and curator Lucy R. Lippard later identified her as a figure who “subverted or overrode Minimalism on its own turf.”

Born in Brooklyn, Castoro lived and worked in New York on Spring Street in Lower Manhattan until her death in 2015. Major posthumous career retrospectives have been held at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Geneva (2019) and the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (2017). Her work has also been featured in group exhibitions at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2017); National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (2016); Museu de Arte Moderna Rio de Janeiro (2014); Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York (2012); and MoMA PS1, Queens, New York (2003).