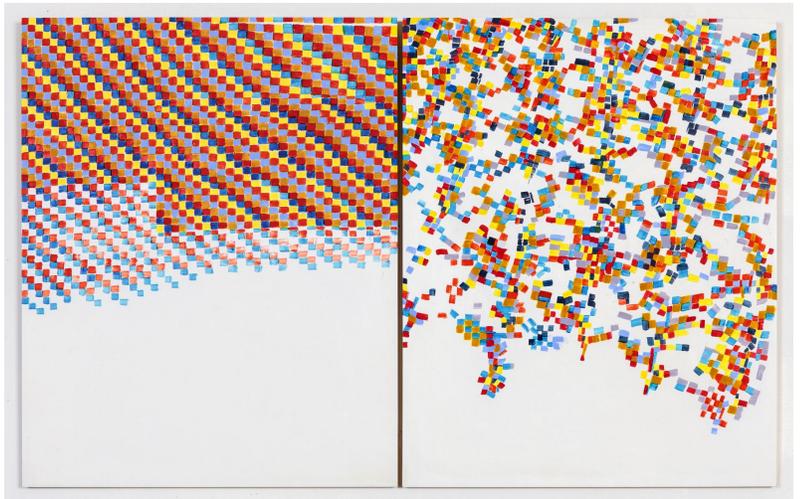


<http://www.haberarts.com/welish.htm>

### **Small Differences**

*John Haber in New York City*

### **Marjorie Welish**



Painting today is resurgent. It is also often derivative and all over the map.

That can make me focus on big gestures, raging geometries, and hybrid media. Consider, though, two abstract artists who retain firm ties to Minimalism on the one hand and visual rewards on the other. [Marjorie Welish](#) still builds on small differences to create active compositions. [Yun Hyong-keun](#), who came to maturity in the 1970s and died in 2007, stuck to sparer and darker stains on cotton. He cannot match her color and complexity, but he bridges late Modernism in New York and Korea. Last, Michael Rouillard, Erin O'Keefe, and others further attest to abstraction's problems and resurgence.

#### *Same difference*

[Marjorie Welish](#) knows as much as anyone the logic and illogic of abstraction. Her latest has her usual structural clarity. The result, though, is anything but predictable. As usual, too, the surprises begin with small differences. They can cause a painting to dissolve right before your eyes. Then again, it might just be getting going.

Not that she is saying *what* differences. Her show's title alone, "Some Differences," sounds designed to let painting speak for itself, although some may think of gender and [women in postwar abstraction](#). Paintings starting in 2012 build on small squares of primary colors, with the brightness and opacity of acrylic, but they gain in intensity from orange and a paler blue as well. More recent paintings stick to shades of Payne gray, which can range from near black to sky blue. Artists often use it, in fact, as a mixer in place of black to gain subtlety and variety. Both series insist on the imperfection of hand-painted squares.

They are also diptychs. In another's hand, two panels can cohere as a [balanced unity](#), like monochrome for [Ellsworth Kelly](#). Here, too, though, Welish seeks out differences. Typically one panel sticks more closely to the grid, starting at the upper left. In the facing panel, squares begin almost at once to peel away. Both panels leave the very bottom empty apart from the pale ground.

She speaks of the two halves as differing not just in execution but in *mode*. How radical a difference? An exception, a painting from more than twenty years ago in four panels, offers clues. At the top left, the squares add up to diagonal bands of color, although with hints of

white creeping in. Red, white, and blue start to take over in the lower left, while the colors burst into layered or colliding shards at the upper and lower right. In stripping things back to two panels, fewer colors, fewer explosions, and a more prominent ground, the new paintings seem designed to bring out the essentials.

Welsh overlaps a show in the same gallery of Owen Schuh. His title, "Drawing Rules," could apply to her as well, much as she called work in 2008 "Painting as Diagram." He, too, builds on small elements that, up close, take on aspects of mapping or drawing. From a distance, they often form concentric circles, like dabs of color for [Alma Thomas](#). Welsh's diptychs and her alternation between color and gray may also recall the mitered mazes of [Frank Stella](#). Again, though, her patterns refuse the predictable or complete.

I thought, too, of the sputtering pixels from primitive video games, especially given the sense of motion. She may find the association distasteful, but she is still insisting on the limits of the digital in the hands of a painter. She must also remember when theorists were starting to quarrel with formalism—and not just for the sake of politics or gender. Deconstruction saw language and literature as rule-based structures that cannot help breaking the rules. Exhibitions were speaking of "[line as language](#)" as well. In each case, differences large and small cannot help adding up to sense.

