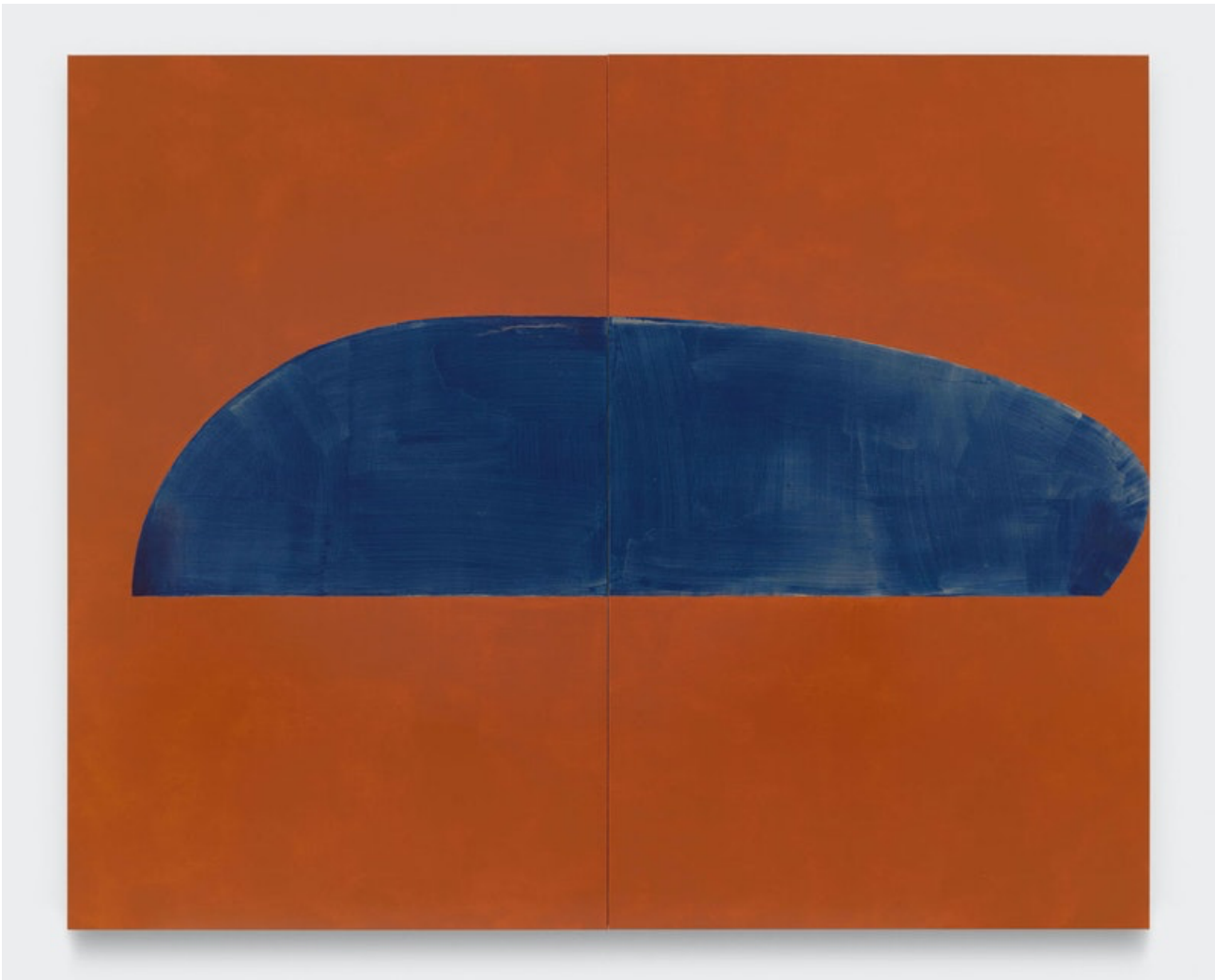


KATE MACGARRY

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS. POLITICS. AND CULTURE

Suzan Frecon & Patricia Treib

By Louis Block



Suzan Frecon, *mars indigo*, 2019. © Suzan Frecon. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner.

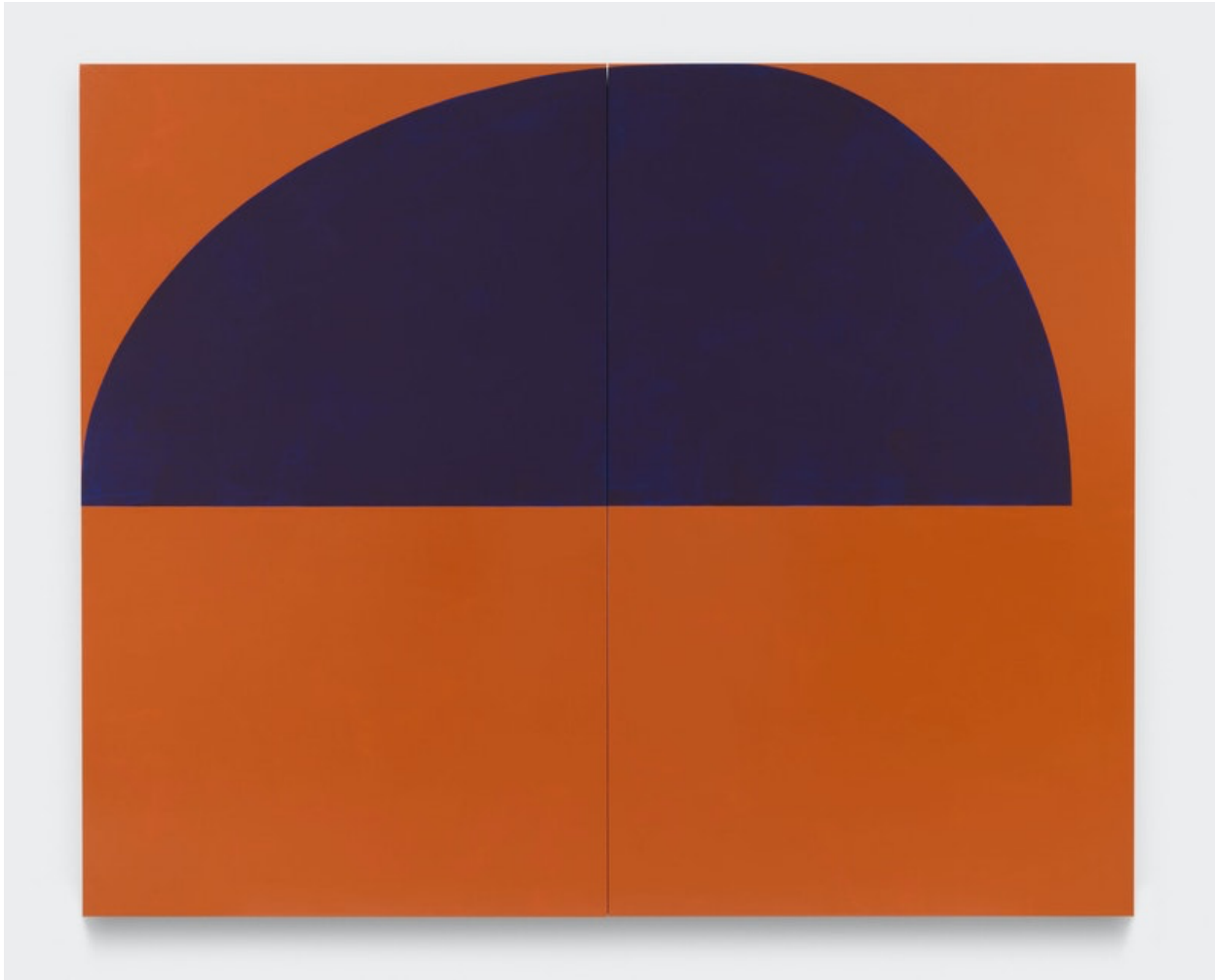
“How can we find our way through what separates words from what is both without a name and more than a name: a painting? What is it that we are trying to go through? The space of the very act of naming?”—
Julia Kristeva, “Giotto’s Joy”

Good painting gives us pause because it is so absorbed in a proprietary language that we must approach it on foreign terms. We cannot begin to shape our own words without our bodies becoming enlisted in the object's way of making meaning in the world; so the great loss of having been separated from painting for the past five months was not the vagueness of scale, color, and texture in reproduction, but the cleaving of bodies from these objects that are not static by definition. Painting's name, unlike that of other artforms, exists in the gerund.

For Suzan Frecon, the evolution of painted form is a deliberate process bound in deep material knowledge. Few artists can claim such an expansive color vocabulary as Frecon, whose palette spans from rusty ochres and siennas to agate and terre verte. Her blues are of a gemlike luminosity that makes clear the shared root between lapis and lapidary. There is no waning investment in this library of pigments, but in her recent series of two-panel paintings, Frecon's compositions appear to move away from the stricter geometry of former work, floating singular shapes on monochrome grounds. An architectonic impulse used to tether the artist's forms to the edges of their respective panels, but now her ovoids and arches display a coy relationship with the rectangle, their points barely kissing the edge of the canvas, their centers bisected by the division between panels. This paring down of compositions focuses the eye deeper into her fields of color and their meeting points, in effect bringing the body closer to the canvas. In paintings like *mars indigo* (2019) or *brushwood haematites* (2018) Frecon's layering of brushstrokes has the feeling of a well-touched velvet or suede, but the oil's omnidirectional application baffles the eye up close, as if the pigment were suspended in an impossibly thick layer between surface and substrate. Toward the edges, the brushstrokes move in concert again to define form.

But Frecon's new paintings should not be viewed from their center outward. Their scale demands an ambulatory looking, and their centripetal form pulls from one edge to the other along invisible extensions of interior curves. Thus, there is the feeling that what first appeared to be a looser relationship with geometry is actually an expansion of geometry into the viewing space. Following the lines in these compositions, with their freeform modulation of radii and tangents within predetermined rectangles, dismisses any first impression of a loosening of form.

Passing through the space of these paintings, alternating applications of oil shift between matte and gloss, and all sense of depth gets confused with movement. The familiar question of *what* is eclipsed by a lateral insistence: it does not matter what Frecon's shapes depict, or where they come from, only that they are experienced in the round, morphing and accelerating like passing vehicles casting us into shadow.



Suzan Frecon, *mars stealing the night*, 2019. © Suzan Frecon. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner.

Across town, standing among Patricia Treib's new paintings, I felt restless in deciding which canvas to place myself in front of. The installation's conceit is simple, but it doesn't take hold immediately: in the gallery's main space, six paintings are arranged in a rough circle, each with a twin canvas hung on an opposite wall. The paintings are placed next to unlike neighbors rather than those with shared motifs, barring the viewer from comparing two similar works in a single field of view. This is disorienting, as the paintings read as individual compositions rather than successive iterations of a motif. But Treib's practice is deeply involved in developing a language of repeated motifs, so this strategy seems evasive at first.



Left: Patricia Treib, *Interlude II*, 2020. Right: *Shoulders*, 2020. Courtesy the artist and Bureau, New York.

For over a decade, Treib has focused her eye on liminal spaces—observed in life or in other paintings—to create the highly stylized shapes that populate her canvases. Notably, Treib has carried the jagged negative shape between two figures in Piero della Francesca’s *Legend of the True Cross* through countless variations, thinning and stretching it until its initial reference seemed forgotten. This is the generosity of Treib’s work: abstraction occurs in measured steps, the viewer allowed to participate in moments both adjacent and removed from the artist’s initial observation. At certain points, as in the current show, these tracks of visual processing seem distant from each other, the evolving motifs not yet functioning in the same space. Because of this, it is possible to separate the current paintings (all from this year) into pairs: *Stems* and *Shoulders*, representing pear-like pendants bisected by branches; *Gyre* and *Pieces*, dominated by an avian or aquatic central form and punctuated by bursts of putti-like activity; and *Interlude II* and *Flourish II*, which incorporate familiar shapes from Treib’s lexicon, namely a squat candle below a crown-topped mass.

Treib's shapes seem to be caught in the process of naming themselves, brushstrokes gelling the raw data of observation into a world of fluid icons. Though they are scaled up to roughly human dimensions, her gestures originate in small preparatory works; that translation of scale from the swivel of the wrist to a full arm movement undoubtedly facilitates the skewing and refining of shapes into their trademarks. These marks are transparent about their creation, executed in assured swoops and turns of wide hake brushes, the oil thinned right up to the point where it begins to consider splitting but resists. Up close, there is evidence of the short time the paint spent in its liquid form, pooling into the canvas's toothed texture, catching hairs and dust in its strokes, marbling and mingling with adjacent pigments.

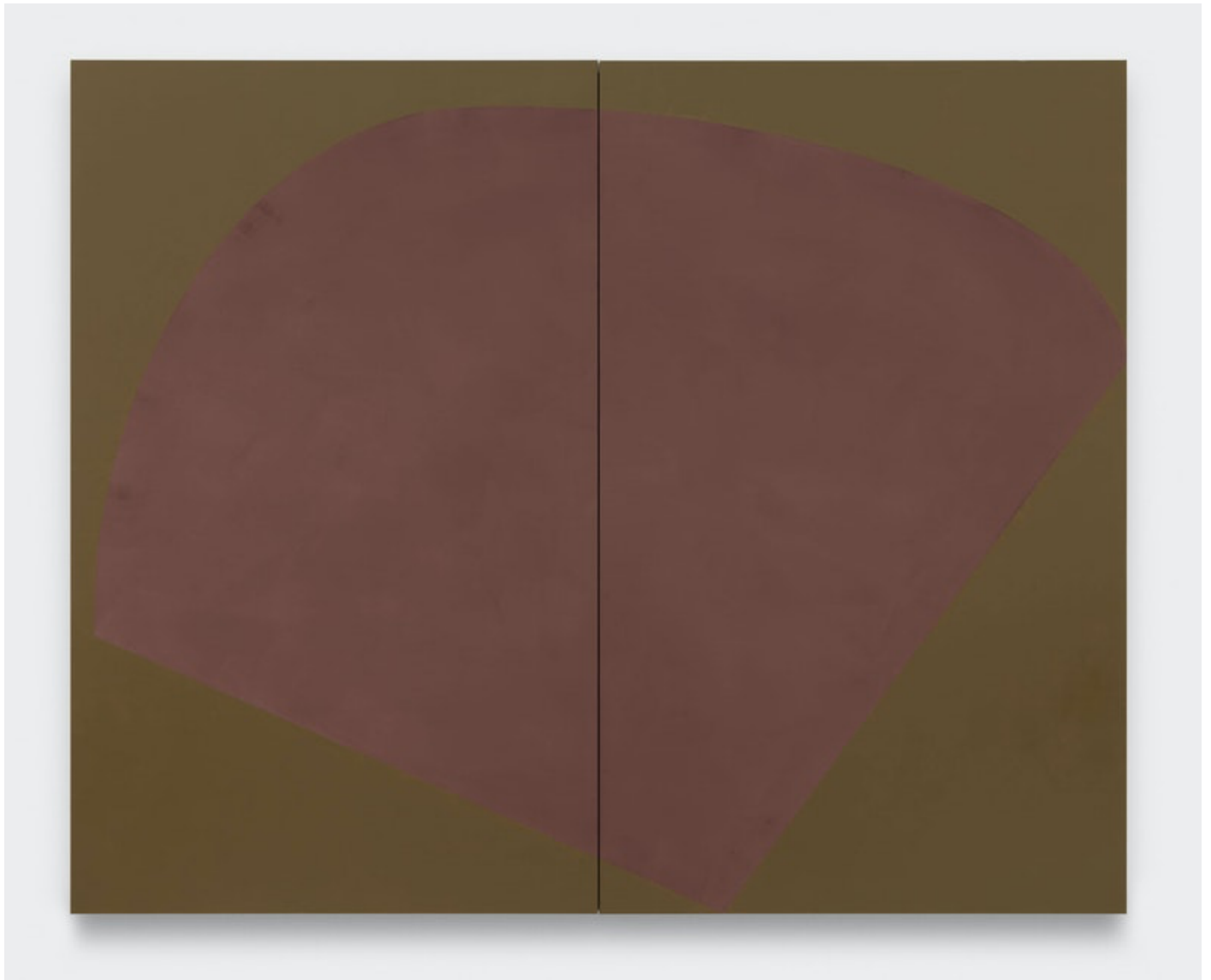


Left: Patricia Treib, *Flourish II*, 2020. Right: *Stems*, 2020. Courtesy the artist and Bureau, New York.

The show's title, *Arm Measures*, could refer to the physical limits of Treib's gestures, but it could also play with the convention of naming clock parts as "hands"—a nod to the artist's childhood with a father who ran a clock repair shop (the aforementioned crown-topped shape is taken from an antique clock visible in a studio shot). Returning again to the circular placement of canvases

in the gallery, with shared motifs drawing diametrical lines across the floor, their freezing of gesture spinning the viewer into a ticking progression, it seems possible to read the canvas pairs as views of the same subject at different times of day—a houseplant at midnight and six, or a still life at nine and three—or even evidence in the evolution of an alphabet, notes always serving toward some unknown end. Inevitably, this process is a cyclical one: sketches on the wall find their way into still lifes, and already-digested shapes are thrust back into the machine. A cynical view of this process might be concerned with the indulgence of its voracious recycling of material into pure, distilled style; yet, another view might champion the interiority of a practice that manages to sustain itself through self-referentiality. It seems most productive to acknowledge the perpetually unfinished nature of Treib's process as intrinsic to its meaning. To name something is, in a way, to place it in the past, categorized and out of mind. By refusing to finish her act of describing, Treib leaves names in the future. Filling the gap between source reference and language is the painting itself, and it is fitting that this space is both improvisatory and stiff, stylized and awkward. The present is for contradiction, not interpretation.

Frecon's shapes, with their arching progression, also seem increasingly involved with the measure of sustained time. Her cathedral pictures flattened the space of a tiered architectural system modulated mostly by light and surface, but these new paintings assume a more direct relationship with the viewer. Nathaniel Dorsky was right to equate Gothic cathedrals with cinema, in that stained glass created an interior world where light projected inward at the viewer. Yet we exist on the other side of such an interior view of the world, and Frecon's isolated arcs are stretching across architecture, reading more as the collected paths of sundials burned into substrate, much as they affect the retina upon slow looking. She calls these shapes "lunettes," an architectural form, but also a word that conjures images of the moon in its infinite variations between crescent and orb, and the French term for eyeglasses. We are not meant to receive these paintings as projections, but to see *with* them.



Suzan Frecon, *vernal breath of plum*, 2019. © Suzan Frecon. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner.

In the most silent of her canvases, *vernal breath of plum* (2019), a central fan shape reveals itself in an almost iridescent succession of purples, greens, and browns moving across the surface. Frecon prefers the word “designation” to “title” for the lowercase names she gives her paintings so as to not imply a representational relationship with a particular subject. So here *plum* is less the fruit than the color, *breath* less the act of breathing than the spirit of the thing, and *vernal* not the season but the incipient feeling. Is this the experience of gazing at the first buds on a plum tree? I hope so: then it can be recreated. The earth rushes up as purple slowly unfurls in your peripherals—and it is a verdant, confusing purple, one you have no name for.

Real, self-conscious oil painting has always been about time. At first it was about the mastery of time, from the suspended time of still life to the epic time

of history painting. Then, liberated by photography, it was about conspicuous time, visible in blurs and drips. Now we are emerging, optimistic, from a period that limited our experience of time to digital routine. Our reading of these objects may be skewed by prolonged isolation, but, if anything, they bring more joy now in their increased foreignness. We should feel off balance in front of paintings, because their meaning is not finished. And now that I can access paintings again, I feel greedy. I want to flick the light switch on and off in front of Treib's canvases, and see her gestures floating on my retinas in a continuum. I want to sit with Frecon's paintings well past the gallery's closing time until the skylights dim and there is no sheen on the paintings' surfaces, and, finally, color becomes imperceptible.