

Review: "Mara Held and Julia Kunin: Kaleidoscope Eyes" at McClain Gallery

by [Doug Welsh](#) | March 13, 2023



Installation view of "Kaleidoscope Eyes" by Mara Held and Julia Kunin at McClain Gallery, Houston.

It felt like I was being lured in by an angler fish. The psychedelic and captivating beauty of *Kaleidoscope Eyes* at McClain Gallery lulled me into a state of visual hypnosis. I was fully entranced by the perfect pairing of Mara Held's radiant, spiraling, and tessellated paintings, and Julia Kunin's

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shimmering, oil slick, and fluorescent ceramic forms. As if waking from a dream, I slowly became aware of references to art history, spirituality, and music — the title of the show comes from a line in “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” by The Beatles. The psychedelic and lyrical energy is accentuated with lines and edges that permeate these objects, creating caverns, windows, and pools for meditation and contemplation. These are timeless works that feel at once ancient and futuristic, unplaceable yet undeniable.



Angler fish are dangerous; beneath the vibrant veneer of these objects lies something murky, mysterious, and alive. I feel this most viscerally from the serpentine pairing of Kunin’s *Le Boulon* and Held’s *Straight Lines 15*. Referencing *The Bolt*, a work by 18th-century painter Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Kunin’s coiling ceramic sculpture, constructed with conjoined padlocks, is similarly about the thrill and potential risk of romance. Held’s painting of a swirling, convoluting form is composed entirely of small, straight lines. This humorous and irreverent work also signals the perils of believing what we are told, over what we see and experience, in art and in the world more broadly.



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Towards the back of the gallery, past a sea of scholar's rocks and kaleidoscopic paintings, there is a kind of sanctuary, with another flawless pairing of works. Held's *Autumn 3* and Kunin's *Copper Machine Dreams* are bursting with shared echoes and ripples. Both works are almost symmetrical, somewhere between geometric and organic abstraction. Mirrored in Held's diptych and in Kunin's wall-mounted sculpture are circular, triangular, and linear shapes, which form edges and barriers. Egg tempera and gouache paint and rare Hungarian glazes lap the shores of these barriers. The resulting effervescent spaces become folds, vessels, and relics of some ancient and forgotten language, or cogs in a futuristic machine.



Mara Held, "Autumn 3," 2018, egg tempera on linen over panel, 9 x 24 1/2 inches.

The synchronicity of this two-person exhibition is almost unbelievable, especially given that most of the works were made before any discussion of showing together. *Kaleidoscope Eyes* is a radiant and hypnotic symphony of repeating, spiraling, and undulating forms, effortlessly harmonized. These are primal, symbolic, and sublime works, riddled with references, and overflowing with spaces to store our memories and desires.



Julia Kunin, "Copper Machine Dreams," 2017, ceramic, 56 x 24 x 3 1/2 inches.

Kaleidoscope Eyes is on view at [McClain Gallery](#) through May 6, 2023.