

MARA HELD

Using an elaborate process of her own invention, this New York-based painter transforms patterns found in nature into colorful, lyrical abstractions.

BY VICKY LOWRY

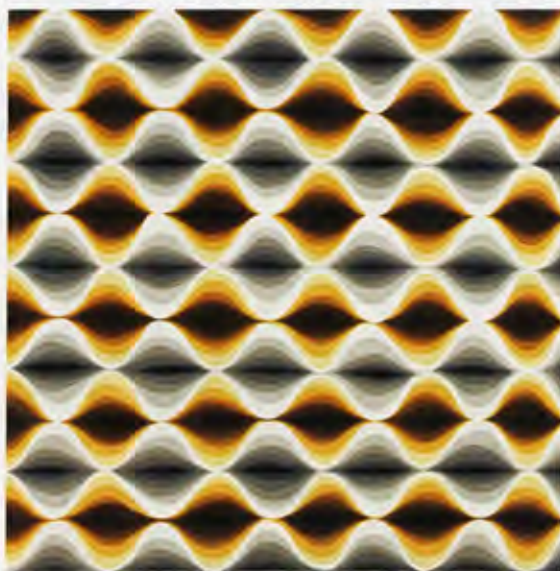
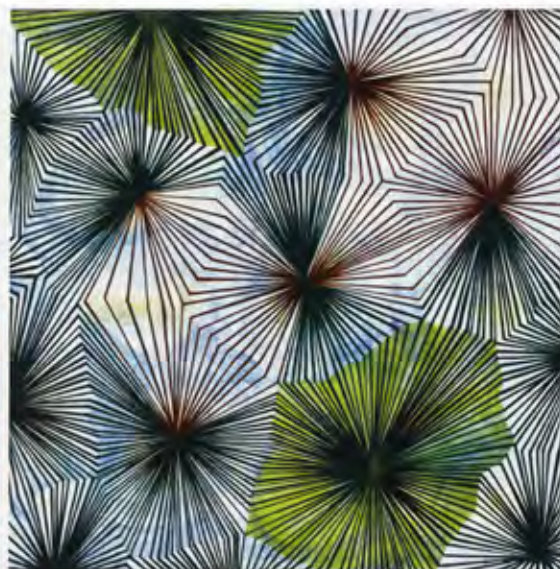
Mara Held didn't become an artist—at least officially—until she was 35, but she grew up so immersed and fluent in the art world that she has lived the life of one from the start. Her father, Al Held, was an influential abstract painter known for canvases full of big, bold geometric shapes. He took her to look at art throughout her childhood on New York's Lower East Side. "My mother likes to tell the joke that when I was a baby I'd crawl around and clean the floor of my father's paint with my diaper," Held recalls. "I'd roller-skate through his studio with a paintbrush in my hand, and he would say, 'See that big canvas over there? Go to town!'"

These days, Held's paintings are far more deliberately crafted. Layered with repeat patterns and ribbonlike circles suggesting topography, and infused with luscious, modulating colors, a canvas can take her months to complete. Her output—she made 14 pieces last year, some the size of a windowpane—is far from prodigious (to the chagrin of her dealer, Garth Greenan). Held dwelled a half-year on

the lyrical, piercingly blue *Ogee* (2012), one of the new works shown last spring at the Gary Snyder Gallery in New York's Chelsea neighborhood. "My paintings all happen very slowly," she explains. "*Ogee* may look fresh and spontaneous, but it kicked my ass."

Hers was a circuitous route to the family business. In her sophomore year at City University of New York, Held followed a boyfriend to Guatemala, where she lived for two years, learning to weave on a back-strap loom and absorbing Mayan culture. After getting a degree, she moved to California, took courses at UCLA in art therapy, and set up a private practice. When Held returned to New York City in the 1980s, she taught essay writing to college students; as an adjunct professor teaching two days a week, she finally had the time, schedule, and desire to pursue painting in earnest.

Today she works in a rustic studio (originally a bull barn) on an old dairy farm in upstate New York that her father bought and renovated in the 1960s. Inspirations for her paintings are both tacked ▶



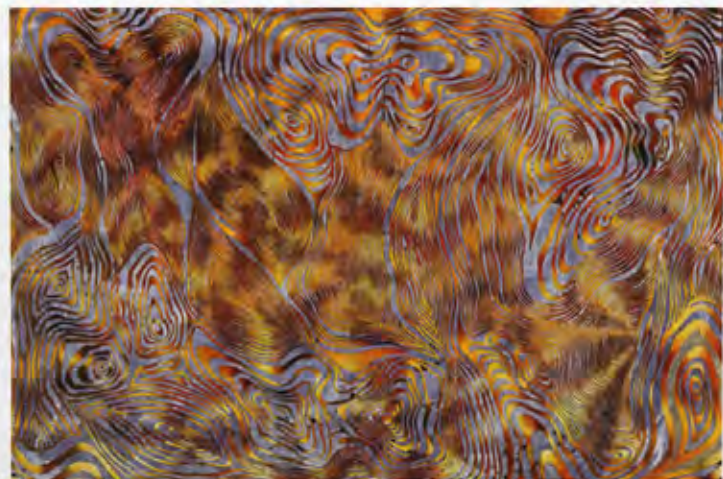
CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: *Errant Traveler*, 2012; *Seventh Clime*, 2011; *Gates of Cilicia*, 2011; *Ostinato*, 2007.



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Scan the image at left to view more of the artist's work.

to a back wall—there are topographical maps and a photograph of a waterfall in the Catskills—as well as just outside the studio windows in the undulating landscape of the property. But Held points out that she's not a painter of ideas: "It's more that I have a thought or a feeling—that something has intrigued me, and I want to explore it in my own language."

First, she paints an atmospheric field on primed linen before applying a layer of frisket, a thin, sticky film. Then she begins to draw.



With an X-Acto knife, she starts cutting away the frisket and elements of the drawing. "If you think of a fisherman's net, there's the netting and the space between," Held says. "I'm equally interested in both areas." Finally, she starts painting with egg tempera, an ancient technique favored by Quattrocento artists such as Fra Angelico and Botticelli that produces a crackled surface with an aged effect. Then she removes the rest of the frisket. "I have a eureka moment when I lift all the frisket and it's a surprise," she says.

Painting with egg tempera requires meticulousness, explains Carter Foster, curator of drawings at the Whitney Museum of American Art. "It's not a medium where you can sling the paint around. You can see the precision of Mara's work even though the forms are not hard-edged like her father's."

The results, Foster adds, are lively. "Her paintings seem optimistic. They're full of exuberance, which is very appealing."

That level of energy is impressive given her laborious process, but then, emotions are what have always driven this curious, adventurous artist. "A lot of what's going on is inner experience—joys, frustrations, giggles, screams," she says. "If you've got to get it out, you might as well get it out on canvas." ■