

Art in America
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ROBIN MITCHELL

In this group of small gouaches on paper done over the last six years, Robin Mitchell draws from a lexicon of abstracted florals, vines, branches, sunbursts, buds, pods, microscopic life, ganglia and spermatozoa, all afloat on washy grounds of color. Compositions are either centrally organized in vortices to create pulsing moire or spinning effects, or dynamically lined up in vertical or horizontal patterns. The shapes are archetypal and recall forms from Egyptian hieroglyphics and stylized decorative borders, Eastern mandalas, early modernist abstraction or popular 1950s design motifs. With the chromatics high-keyed and close-valued--like fluorescent spring greens and turquoises next to cadmium reds and oranges all laid down in the quick, assured strokes gouache requires--her images seem to vibrate and quiver in their electromagnetic fields.

Mitchell's heightened sense of the spirit and rhythms in nature is heir to Arthur Dove's and Charles Burchfield's investigations of a life force beyond mere appearances and their extension of Romantic nature philosophy into the 20th century. Mitchell strives for a similar mystical, transcendent quality but with the added influence of '60s psychedelia. Several of the "flower power" paintings, with their bold paint-stroke petals radiating from the center like ejaculatory starbursts, are layered over spirals, concentric circles, daubs and dots of paint or multicolored checkerboards, simulating the trance-inducing, ecstatic charge so associated with hippie esthetics. In an untitled work from 2004, hot-colored, leafless tree forms layered over thin brushy orbs and transparent veils of pigment spring up rankly, as if on the verge of outgrowing the confines of the paper. A 2006 work employs similar space-defying acts with its optically oscillating bands of warm and cool color at play in pools of tiny floating colored dots--like a visual translation of a musical score in which the notes and bars are polychromed and infinitely tiered. Both a highly energized surface and an illusion of deep space at once, the painting invites meditation on states of consciousness as well as the cosmos.

If Mitchell seems too nostalgic for the sincerity of early modernism or the '60s subculture's belief that encounters with altered states would open minds to effect critical change, her work is nevertheless notable for its visionary power. At a time when, as philosopher David Michael Levin claims, we are "crying for a vision" to reconstruct our relationship with the environment, the use of archetypal "transhistorical" patterns such as Mitchell's can transform our sense of vision. Whether seeking to connect the human psyche more deeply with its natural sources or presenting a rapturous response to the beauty of organic form, she makes these small paintings seem epic.