

## MARGARET NOMENTANA: IRREADABILITY

By Peter Frank

IN THE WAKE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY'S ENDURING EXPERIMENT WITH EXPRESSION (ESPECIALLY "SELF"-EXPRESSION), artistic mark-making has been championed as an integral, even primary, activity. But mark-making for its own sake is not enough. The marks must cohere—not necessarily as ciphers, but as some sort of visual signal. If they do not constitute a script, and convey language thereby, they must constitute some kind of image or at least some kind of record, some sense of the hand having deliberated and moved according to a reason that needs those marks to look as they do, and to have been placed as they have. What comprises legibility here is not the readability of the marks, but their dynamic—their poise within a field. Their actual glyphic content can be minimal, even illusory; their calligraphic suggestivity, their en-formation, suffices as their information. The recent painting of Margaret Nomentana relies on this condition of quasi-legibility—and plays crucially with its conditionality.

Throughout her career, Nomentana has regarded form as meaning. Educated in a tradition of painterly abstraction, she has always believed that shape, and color and texture and gesture and saturation, bear meaning in their very presence—or certainly in their orchestration into presence, which is the task of the non-objective artist. When Frank Stella insisted early on in his own career that "what you see is what you see," he was not simply arguing for the sufficiency of form per se, but the sufficiency of its power to inspire sensation in the beholder. Nomentana has long subscribed to this understanding of abstraction's power, although, as her recent work

clarifies, she is less satisfied even than Stella to let form per se mean per se. She recognizes not just the metaphoric qualities of aesthetically devised visual and physical phenomena, but their integral relationship with visual and physical phenomena based on other systems, other contexts of generation. In this, Nomentana knowingly derives not simply from Stella's generation of formalists—the generation of her teachers—but from previous generations of abstractionists whose practice relied on social ideology, perceptual investigation, and metaphysical construction as sources for their work (not to mention reasons for its existence). Her work re-explores the meaningful intricacies of early 20th century abstractionists not to revive those intricacies—she works in the belief that such intricacies do not need revising, as they have never been lost—but to capitalize on them, to find her own voice by finding her own language within a modernist discourse.

We can identify Nomentana, then, as a "neo-modernist." Her ideals, like those of the thousands of non-objective artists who have come before her, reside in the artwork itself, and regard abstract form as a sufficient, even crucial, means of conveying sensation and sensibility between artist and viewer. This conveyance is the basic purpose of art, as it functions to stimulate more than just optical response. Its order, or disorder, provokes parallel perception in the viewer, whose regard for the world is modified thus. The formulation can be pretty, or jagged, or lyrical, or bleak—and Nomentana's paintings have been all of these—but in each case the feeling conveyed by the formulation speaks to, or perhaps induces, sensations on

the viewer's part that say something about life—something that, however profound, the viewer feels immediately.

This immediacy is a goal of abstraction—and, in work as radically simplified as Nomentana's, this immediacy is the primary goal. The work itself is hardly simple, but it relies on a pared-down vocabulary of shape and color. Indeed, beyond its vocabulary of marks – and, you might say, its syntax of placement – Nomentana's work relies on the stark formula propounded most famously by leading abstraction theorist Hans Hofmann, a formula that posits a "figure" against a "ground." The basic elements are that...well, that elemental, the thing rendered against, and thus standing out before, its field of visual context. (In Hofmann's native German, the word for "object" is *Gegenstand*—"stand-against.") Coming out of a landscape tradition, Hofmann himself allowed for nuanced gradation between figure and ground. But Nomentana comes out of the tradition that Hofmann helped put into motion, a mark-making tradition in which the marks are made on a field that suspends them in a depthless and yet infinite space. This tradition has been identified through the years with different groups of artists, critics, galleries, cities, and even regions, from Houston to the Canadian Prairie. Washington, in fact, is one of the major sites for this "color field" interpretation of Hofmann's teachings, and it was in Washington where Nomentana was exposed to such practice in local museums and, ultimately, at the Corcoran School of Art.

But Nomentana has lived and worked all over, from Los Angeles to Maine, from New York to Rome, and has responded to and absorbed models as diverse as Georgia O'Keeffe and Eva Hesse, the

German expressionists and the Russian constructivists, Ellsworth Kelly and Morris Louis (to name only some of her modernist sources). She has long relied as well on a crucial aspect of the modernist sensibility, the sense of fracture and irruption that painter Budd Hopkins, among others, has identified as the "collage aesthetic" pervading modern (not to mention post-modern) life. As opposed to some of her other series, Nomentana has employed some collage technique in the work on view here, but, more importantly, we see a collage-like reasoning here, one that establishes a heightened contrast between figure and ground, and even between discrete figures. Indeed, Nomentana's tendency to scatter those figures betrays a love of the aleatory, a taste for randomness and chance that, at least since Dada, has been a significant characteristic of modernist collage.

That tendency, ironically, undermines rather than supports the "readability" of Nomentana's often calligraphic-seeming marks. The coherence discussed earlier that would give the marks a quality of legibility is not in evidence; much as it may resemble, and be derived from, calligraphy, this is not writing, and is not meant to appear as such. Rather, another kind of coherence pertains, a more planar coherence that allows Nomentana to counterpose—or, if you would, scatter—her marks in dynamic, asymmetric relationships. Refusing to think of the canvas as writing paper, she has avoided the linguistic convention of notation, opting instead for the more painterly convention of planarity. In this, Nomentana also manifests the collage sensibility, empowered as she is to work across and down the plane with a constantly varying vocabulary (if unified syntax) of marks and gestures.

What Nomentana strives for here, and in much of her work, is the sense of the presence of text rather than any actual textuality. For all her love of literature, and for all the particular pleasure and stimulation she derives from poetry, Nomentana is a painter, not a writer, and is painting and drawing, not writing. Indeed, one thing to which she does aspire is the conveyance of a sensation only conveyed abstractly, beyond words, beyond images—conveyed perhaps in music (another source of pleasure and inspiration for her—as are the related arts of dance), but otherwise available to us only in the most nuanced of non-objective imagery. Her search is, if anything, for the sublime.

Nomentana's journey toward the sublime devolves from her commitment to abstraction itself; admiring the painting in particular of Mark Rothko, she has seen in it the infinitude and transcendence associated with the contemporary (as opposed to Kantian) definition of the sublime. In her own evolution Nomentana has explored various modes and formulations that might permit a glimpse into the marvelous abyss. But she always quite deliberately moderates that glimpse with the noise of the world and the mind. Her work does not let go of quotidian experience; the marks and shapes in the current work serve to celebrate the pulse of daily life even as it sets that pulse against an intimated fathomlessness. Rather as did O'keeffe, Nomentana seeks the midpoint between the everyday and the eternal; unlike O'keeffe, she does not find that midpoint by locating eternity in the everyday, but by distilling the everyday into abstract marking, and, in contrast, by giving the eternal its own visual presence, however approximate.

This, then, is how we can ultimately read Nomentana's figure-ground relationships. The figures—marks, ciphers, proto-letters—manifest the ordinary world, but make it less ordinary. The grounds—fields of unmodulated or barely nuanced color—manifest the unknowable universe, but make it slightly more knowable. In their abstraction, the figures begin to move into the grounds. In their visualization, the grounds begin to rise to the surface. In Margaret Nomentana's painting, the everyday and the eternal move towards one another, ever so slightly.

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## MARGARET NOMENTANA: SIGNS, TRACES, FIELDS

By Peter Frank

**A**S IT HAS IN THE WORK OF SO MANY AMERICAN ARTISTS OVER THE LAST HALF CENTURY, GESTURE HAS PLAYED A CENTRAL ROLE IN THE WORK OF MARGARET NOMENTANA. But in Nomentana's case the gesture of the hand or brush figures only secondarily; it is the gestural formation itself that has always functioned as the building block of her painting. As such, that formation displays the compositional trappings of the gesture without in fact being gestural.

Nomentana does not just paint gesturally; she composes with gesture. The gesture's presence as a linear figure, and the enveloping context of the ground on which it lies, or on which it acts comprise the retinal dynamic of her art, particularly her paintings and drawing-collages of the last several years. The linear figure thus manages to be at once geometrical and gestural.

Nomentana professes an abiding interest in calligraphy, and the formalization of gesture upon which calligraphic traditions by definition depend now undergirds her own "gestures." Indeed, without reaching legibility, Nomentana's linear citations have taken on some of the resonance of encoded marks. The marks never become truly alphabetical; by retaining something of the gestural quality from which they arose — including their seemingly random distribution across the painting, a distribution often far more cartographic than calligraphic — these spindly images rebuff the viewers' temptation to "read" them (except perhaps as islands in oceans of color). But their construction, each and severally, cements their relationship to script, or at least to some sort of notational approximation. Are they fragments of an urban map? Shards of ancient tablets, scattered across a burial site or the ruins of a civilization? Even morsels of DNA floating beneath a microscope, promising the renewal, metamor-

phosis, and/or destruction of life itself?

This is the kind of painting that invites such extravagant metaphor-forging, non-objective painting that does not simply fill the eye, but agitates it with information that the artist has cunningly refused to codify. The painting ultimately "means" only itself, but effervesces with enough constructed and contrasted form to tease the mind into its habitual search for narrative coherence. On one level we can be entirely satisfied simply to look at these paintings and works on paper and come away with an optical buzz. But the components of the paintings and drawing-collages are themselves too heterogeneous and too restive to stay in any sort of self-contained pattern or poised array. In their balance of openness and busyness, fixity and fluidity, pure painterliness and notational reference, Nomentana's works on canvas and paper gratify the eye but provide subtle, insistent stimulation to the mind behind it. The buzz is not just optical, but cerebral.

Raised in Baltimore and Washington, and a painting student in the latter city's Corcoran School of Art in the early 1970's, Nomentana is historically a product of American east-coast color-field painting, and it could be said that her work in effect resolves the polarities of that movement. To date she cites Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis as influences, along with that of their harder-edged contemporary Ellsworth Kelly (not to mention their own inspirations, such as Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still). But right there we begin to see the dialectic at work: the gestural flow of Frankenthaler and Louis posed against the crisp contours and unmodulated color Kelly proposes. In Nomentana's consideration here, flow is tempered by edge, and vice versa, which is why her forms, which she al-

ways describes with emphatic definition, still seem in flux — as much soup as noodle, if you would (at least if the noodle is alphabet).

Other experiences as an artist and a student (notably the perpetual student that a true artist always is) have necessarily modified Nomentana's comprehension of the color-field aesthetic. Her participation in the Feminist Studio Workshop in Los Angeles in the mid-1970s, and her exposure to that city's large and varied art community refocused her attention on several feminist models (she mentions Eva Hesse) and thence to the expanded conception of artistic practice that has characterized southern California art since the '60s. Before she moved to Maine in 1995 Nomentana experimented with several formats, including unstretched canvas and installation, and also underwent training as an interior designer. She honed her interest in architecture at this time (as well as in the architecturally related modernism of the Russian avant garde and the Bauhaus), and attributes some of her art's formal dynamics to her understanding of contemporary architectural practice. (In fact she often, and quite reasonably, finds such practice often more visually compelling than contemporary fine art.)

This variety of practice and experience rekindled her passion for self-referential, self-sustaining two-dimensional composition. The need to rededicate herself to this passion was one of the factors prompting her move to a more secluded place — albeit one in sufficient proximity to New York, where she can continue to draw sustenance from a broad variety of cultural activity.

It is not so far-fetched, in truth, to see in Nomentana's recent and current work a response to her love of music and especially dance. A dedicated abstract painter her whole career, she inherits the

tradition of inferred musicality that goes back in practice at least as far as Kandinsky, and in theory even further (to Walter Pater's dictum that "All the arts aspire to the condition of music"). The kinetic impetus of music, one realizes, is made manifest in Nomentana's art, and her broad and adventurous musical tastes — not to mention her balletomania — infuse her work on paper and, especially, painting. She has not consciously generated her linear forms as ciphers for human motion, much less formulated her works as static embodiments of dance or music; but once her enthusiasm for the arts of sound and human movement is acknowledged, it's hard not to see — even feel — a close parallel. Putting aside even the personal notations with which choreographers are wont to annotate their works, the "figures" Nomentana inscribes on sometimes-shifting, sometimes-solid grounds frequently assume the lineaments of a terpsichorean animation. They are too intricate to appear as simple stick figures, but in that intricacy they evince distinctly mammalian, even humanoid, characteristics.

Again, such metaphorical alignments do not adhere altogether comfortably to Nomentana's paintings and drawing-collages. They are, admittedly, contrivances of perception — specifically, of reception. But Nomentana's mind is also that of a human perceiver, and receiver, as responsive as anyone else's to the mystery of form(s) and as capable of embracing — and thus generating — multiple interpretations. The imposing quality of non-objective art is not its lack of meaning but its surfeit. Gleeful and expert, Margaret Nomentana takes full advantage of such challenging richness.

## ON TRACK — THE RECENT WORK OF ARTIST MARGARET NOMENTANA

by Ronny Cohen

*The picture can be a pure reflection of life in its deepest sense. — Piet Mondrian, 1919*

**A**BSTRACTION HAS LONG BEEN AT THE CORE OF THE ART AND VISION OF MARGARET NOMENTANA. Starting in the early 1970's when she was in art school, Nomentana discovered she relates, and very much so, to the abstract tendencies of Minimalism and Post-Minimalism then in vogue. The stress placed on formal qualities by these reductive movements opened up a great creative adventure for her that she embarked on through the 1970's and into the 1980's.

With energy and enthusiasm she investigated the traditions of painting and drawing as she experimented with different materials like plexiglas, processes including folding and collage, and shapes and patterns like the grid. As scale and installation took on greater importance, Nomentana began to consider her artworks as objects in space and in terms of the surrounding environment. The strong visual impulse informing her art is evident as well in the accomplished work she has done in the design field.

Minimalism serves as a general aesthetic touchstone in the recent work. The artist herself says she thinks about what she is doing in "formalist terms" Using lines, shapes, and colors and elements of painted and inked surfaces and collage, Nomentana has developing her own distinctive style of abstract paintings and drawings.

Both the canvases and works on paper are found to pack a keen visual punch. These dynamic compositions in a word — deliver. On what can be termed a connotative level, they hit the high spot. In viewing her work the mind's-eye is taken up with thoughts and experiences beyond the universe of

pure forms — the semantic domain of Minimalism.

What first appear as lines in paintings can and do become more. For example, there are linear configurations — with the more geometric of them bringing up landscapes and maps, and the more organic of them figures and symbols. The idea of more is also brought forth by the lively arrangements of forms. What we read as figures and grounds can seem to course, and even careen across the surface, toward, away and around edges, shifting in and out, floating and hovering, descending, ascending, and pulsing in space.

Both in the paintings and collage drawings the vivid sensations of movement generated by multi-directional currents and the tensions between what can be perceived as chaos and control, balance and imbalance give to these works the kind of high energy — a verve, a vibe — that can appeal directly to the imagination. The more we begin to see in these compositions and think about them, the more they seem to offer. It's no exaggeration to say that Nomentana has made them that way.

The idea that these are works that we can look at from a number of angles has its parallel in how they are produced by her. Nomentana develops her compositions in the course of working on them from different sides. What becomes the top emerges as part of the evolution of the work, and like every other aspect of her art, happens in the making. The process she employs is as active and high energy as the dynamic compositions she produces with it.

Nomentana usually paints on unstretched, unprimed canvas, on the floor. She does much moving up, down, and around a single work. Tending to work on more than one canvas at a time, she moves between multiple pieces. The cutting

and placement of the collage elements is similarly physical. Both painting and drawing for her are involved with gesture — with hand, wrist and arm, the body reaching and crossing into space. Size and scale are elements of the work that she determines according to what she feels right in terms of her own movements. Given the fact that Nomentana was a serious student of ballet in her youth, it is interesting to consider how the intriguing pictorial structures marking her work with their distinctive rhythmical phrasing record an active working process akin to a sort of visual choreography.

Her working process is also deeply contemplative. It involves a looking for and an arriving at what she has called “the appropriate next step.” Working without preconceptions, she needs to find the move and movement necessary for taking the work forward. Through action and reaction Nomentana finds herself at one with her art. Her relationship to nature is similarly grounded. Nomentana divides her time between living in Western Maine, where she maintains her studio, and New York City.

Nature is a dominating feature of the daily environment in which she works. Maine, with its endless woods, broad lakes and towering mountains, beckons. Through a combination of periods of outdoors participation — walking, hiking, kayaking — and of quietude, she establishes what is for her is a right relationship with nature. Some of the drama and compelling mystery belonging to this area of Maine appears to be coming through in the rich variegated colors and imagery that are a feature of the paintings.

New York’s urban setting is brought to mind, in turn, in the black and white and value contrasts given emphasis in the drawings and paintings. Titles like Rosh Hashanah and Iraq show how for

Nomentana abstract art is a part of life. “My work is influenced by everything that I see or do,” the artist says. The more we take stock and measure of the lively pictorial elements provided by Nomentana, the more compelling the experience becomes. Speculation follows. The search for meaning is on. And key to the multiple levels of significance that are contained by her work is a deep and abiding appreciation for the powers of abstraction that the artist harbors.

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