

New American Paintings

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Signifier and Signified: Helen Rebekah Garber at Gallery Wendi Norris

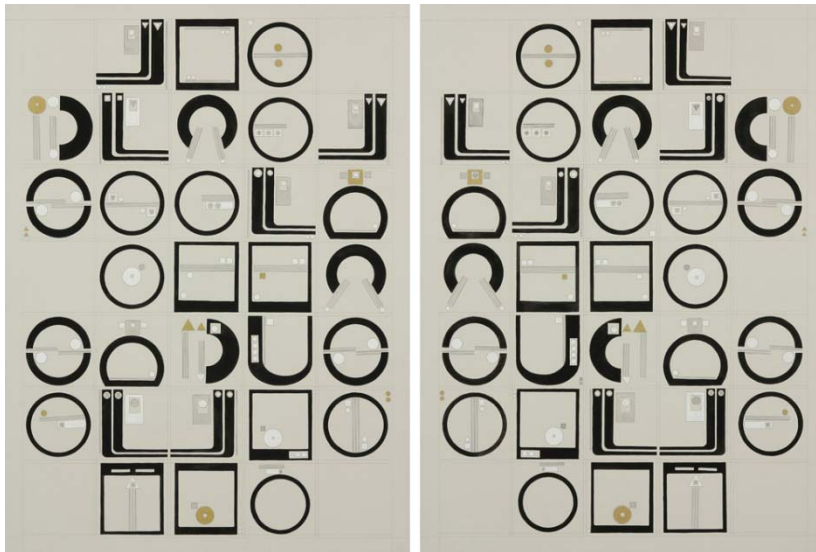
[Helen Rebekah Garber](#)'s paintings must be heavy. They're covered head to toe in thickly impastoed oil paint revealing a layered painting process that must surely take months to complete. The paintings (on view in "Numbers" at [Gallery Wendi Norris](#) through January 9, 2015) seem heavy not only because of their size and impastoed heft but also because from a distance their nearly monochromatic surfaces can resemble talismanic rock engravings. They hang on the walls like sacred tablets. There's a kind of spiritual allusion in Garber's forms, at once seeming to reference mandalas, religious altarpieces, and Mayan hieroglyphs. The paintings speak to a kind of transcendentalism that we also find in the paintings of Chris Martin (like ["For Paul Thek"](#)) or even Forrest Bess (like ["Before Man"](#)). But up close Garber's paintings tell a different story. – *Matt Smith Chavez, San Francisco Contributor*



Helen Rebekah Garber / Haniel I, 2014, Oil on linen, 60 x 60 inches (152.4 x 152.4 cm), Courtesy of Gallery Wendi Norris

If Garber's paintings seem like large monochromatic talismans from a distance upon closer inspection what emerges is an overwhelming materiality, a surprising sculptural thingness that breaks down into a million paint globs. At this microscale Garber's supreme command of color becomes evident as her monochromatic grays yield to dabs of blue, green, yellow, and red that guide the subtle changes in the hues of her compositions. Unlike someone like Forrest Bess, who was deeply committed to the spirituality he assigned to his paintings, Garber's interest in this kind of imagery seems derived less from spiritual truth-seeking and more from a painter's interest in image-making and in the way that meaning is ascribed to form.

Hung alongside the paintings are a series of diptychs made in graphite and gouache on paper. Each diptych references a Walt Whitman poem using a lexicon of symbols adapted from Sir Thomas Moore's [Utopian alphabet](#). Smaller in scale and lacking the performative gestures of her larger works, it's easy to overlook them. But the pairing is important. The diptychs, in their open ended semiotic language - - are they modernist fonts? architectural plans? electronic circuitry? -- remind us that in abstraction meaning is ultimately constructed by us, the viewers. And that suits this savvy artist well.



Helen Rebekah Garber | *Brooding and Blissful Halcyon Days*, 2014, Graphite and gouache on paper, 22 x 30 inches each panel (56 x 76 cm), Courtesy of Gallery Wendi Norris

Helen Rebekah Garber was born 1976 in State College, Pennsylvania and grew up in New York City. She graduated with a BFA from California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California in 2007. Her work has been exhibited at numerous venues in the United States and Europe including The Laguna Art Museum; Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles; 31 Grand Gallery, New York; Bronwyn Keenan Gallery, New York; and Per Mari E Monte Arte, Naples, Italy. She has been featured in publications including *The New York Times*, *New American Paintings*, *Art Ltd.*, *Spin Magazine*, and *The Frankfurter Alleingman Zeitung*. She has received critical attention from writers including, Roberta Smith, Peter Frank, Howard Halle and David Pagel. Helen Rebekah Garber lives and works in Los Angeles.

- See more at: <http://www.newamericanpaintings.com/blog/signifier-and-signified-helen-rebekah-garber-gallery-wendi-norris#sthash.TXky1zBz.dpuf>

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