

SATURATION POINT

The online editorial and curatorial project for reductive, geometric and systems artists working in the UK

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Channa Horwitz at Raven Row, London

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10 March to 1 May 2016

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A review by Mark Liebenrood

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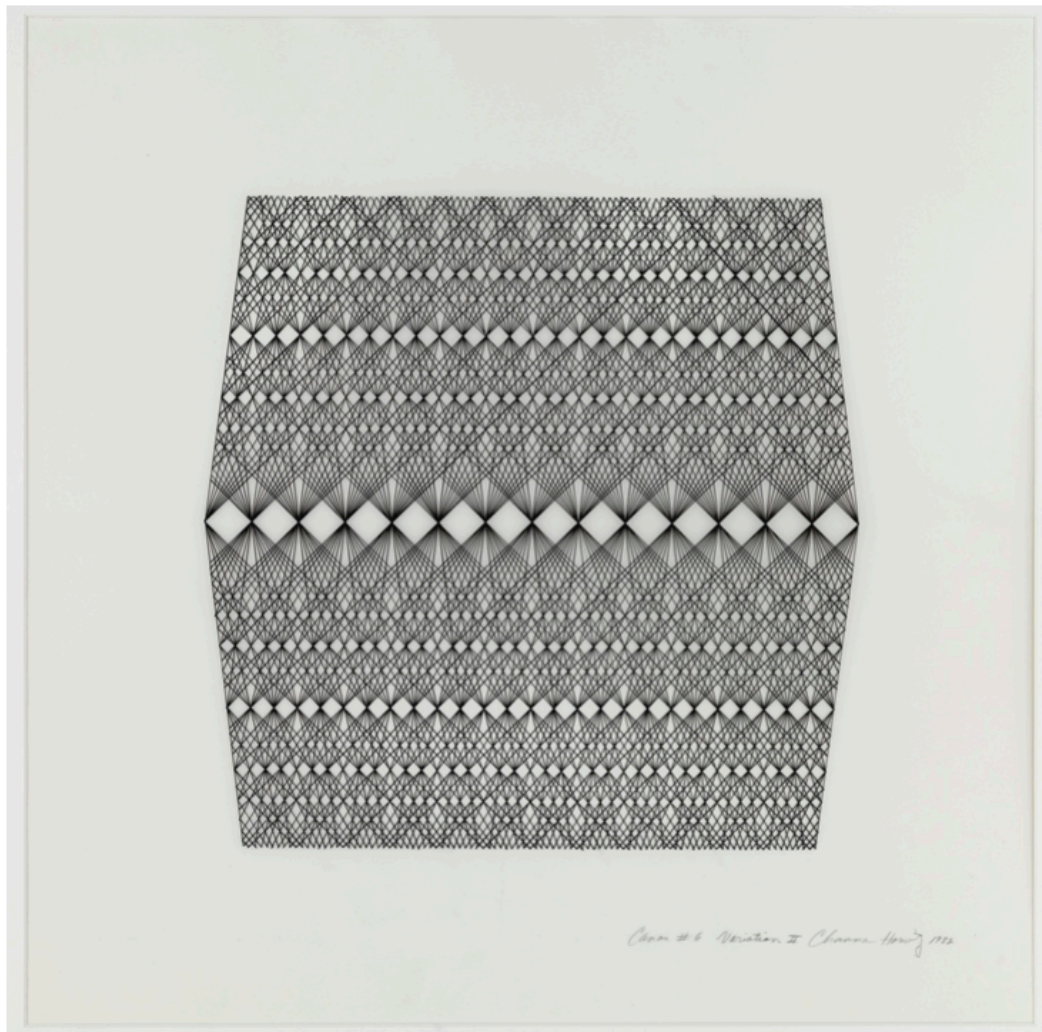


Exhibition view, Channa Horwitz. Works from the series *Sonakinatography*, 1970–2011, photo by Marcus J. Leith

Channa Horwitz worked with a set of highly restricted means throughout her career. Apparently basing her extensive use of the digits 1–8 on the structure of eight-to-the-inch graph paper, and relating those numbers to forms and colours, she exhaustively explored the possibilities within the rules she set herself.

In the *Language Series*, black forms are superimposed on orange grids that resemble sections of pre-printed graph paper, although it seems that Horwitz carefully painted each grid herself. The forms are simple combinations of squares, rectangles, or circles, each assigned a number. The work is generated by means of permutations of the digits, the results arranged in triangular collages along with their working drawings.

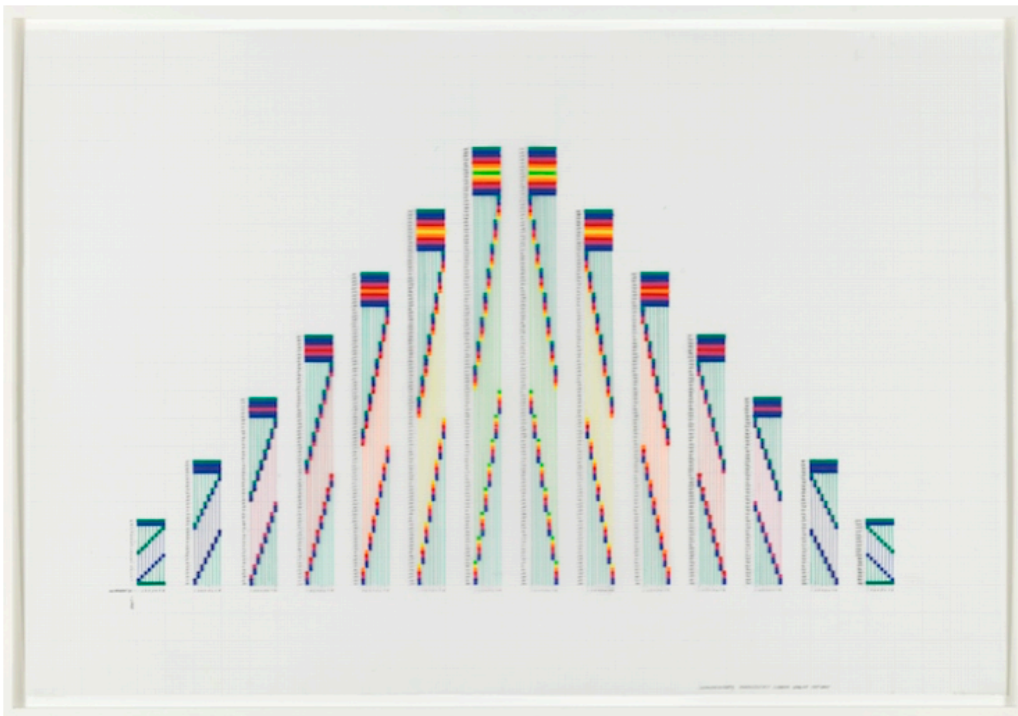
Although the *Language Series* is chromatically restrained, later works are far more colourful. *Canon* is an astonishingly complex painting based upon the traversal of a unit of graph paper by a single line at all possible angles (a monochrome variation from this series is illustrated below). The digits 1–8 are each assigned a colour and the composition begins with single green lines, one colour at a time being superimposed as the painting develops across sixteen vertical units from left to right, building to a dazzling crescendo of eight overlaid colours at the centre before enacting a mirror-image reversal to return to individual green lines at the end.



Channa Horwitz, *Canon 6 Variation II*, 1982 Ink on Mylar. Courtesy Collection Oehmen, Germany, photo by Timo Ohler

Part of the pleasure of this kind of work is purely intellectual: approaching a drawing like a visual puzzle, trying to discern the system of rules that produced it. *Canon* and the *Language Series* are quite readily decoded, but the conceptual foundations of many of Horwitz's *Sonakinatography* works are often far harder to discern (the word is the artist's own coinage, meaning 'sound – motion – notation').

Often read from top to bottom, left to right, these intricate paintings appear more like musical scores than anything else. Each row represents a rhythmic beat, with the numbers 1–8 again each assigned a separate colour and a rhythmic interval. Some of these scores are simply repetitive, others bewilderingly complex. The longest pattern, *Sonakinatography II*, lasts for almost four thousand beats. Each system seems to be explored in such a way as to yet again exhaust its possibilities. I'm reminded here of the English art of change ringing for church bells, which similarly employs a fixed set of tones and mathematical systems of permutation, annotated in vertical diagrams of numbers and interwoven coloured lines.



Channa Horwitz, *Sonakinatography Composition XVII*, 1987-2004. Casein paint on Mylar. Courtesy Estate of Channa Horwitz, photo by Timo Ohler

The overwhelming sense of much of Horwitz's work, then, is that of annotations for performance, rather than independent art works. Indeed, in a corner of the gallery a performance space has been set up, entitled *Displacement*. Like a sculptural version of one of the *Language Series* paintings, a set of black blocks occupies an orange grid, ready to be repositioned (or 'activated') at will by curious visitors or yoga practitioners.

This installation, with its allowance of performative freedom, makes a break from the rule-bound, mathematical constraints of so much of the work on show here. As does a mysteriously anomalous piece, *Breather*, a kinetic sculpture of a continually inflating and deflating bag inside a translucent cube. Its regular wheezing permeates the upper galleries, an echo of a more natural rhythm that Horwitz seems to have worked so hard to exclude from her work for many years.

This is an elegantly presented show, and some of the work is visually stunning on its own terms. But just as reading a musical score is no substitute for the performance, I often found myself wanting to experience in another medium – sound or light – what many of the more diagrammatic works were hinting at. And although some performances have been staged in the gallery, the lack of self-sufficiency in many of the works on show leaves one wanting more than they can give.



Channa Horwitz, *8 Expanded, Variation I* and *8 Expanded, Variation II*, 1981. Ink on graph Mylar. Courtesy the Estate of Channa Horwitz, photo by Marcus J. Leith