

Kayne Griffin Corcoran CULTURED

Soho Stalwart: Mary Obering is having a revival, with a flurry of gallery shows in New York and Los Angeles.



Mary Obering in front of *Colorful Spring Rain*, 1973

The Louisiana-born painter Mary Obering still lives and works in the loft on Wooster Street that she's owned since the early 1970s. It's one of those mythic New York stories, where an artist buys an industrial space downtown for so little that it would be maddening to even mention. For decades, Obering has been producing her boldly-hued geometric paintings there, a twist on the minimal tradition to which the artist belongs. "Soho wasn't the shopping mall that it's become," Obering laughs, remembering her mother visiting from Louisiana in the early days, refusing to step foot in her then new neighborhood.

The apex of the conceptual art world in New York was a far cry from the painter's Southern upbringing in Shreveport. It wasn't until Obering traveled to Italy as a teenager that painting entered her consciousness. "I was astounded by the Renaissance paintings," Obering remembers. "That experience was always in the back of my mind."

In the periphery it seemed to remain, as Obering studied experimental psychology in college, doing research for the famed behaviorist B.F. Skinner. Rather than another digression, Obering describes this period as formative to her practice. "The scientific approach to life, and its impossibilities, led me to become an artist."

Urged by Carl Andre after he saw her work in a group show, and following a series of life-changing experiences – marriage, the birth of her daughter and the dissolution of her marriage – Obering moved from Denver to downtown New York with her young daughter to pursue painting. She quickly became a part of the burgeoning artist community

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there, counting Donald Judd and fellow painter Marcia Hafif as close friends and neighbors. "There were other people living in the neighborhood who were doing exactly what I was doing," remembers Obering. "We were simply raising a family and making art."

Obering's art practice began to converge with the parts of her life that appeared as dreamy diversions, or even interruptions, from making paintings. Around the time Obering became enthralled with particle physics, she "came to know a guy who had a shop on Canal Street where he gilded frames," she recalls. "I hired him to teach me to gild."

This experimentation with materials catalyzed a shift in Obering's practice, bridging her interest in science and art. Soon came her large-scale geometric abstractions, activated by materials that reach across time and space: egg tempera and gold leaf on gessoed panels, the tools of her beloved Italian masters. An influx of recent gallery shows capture this ongoing investigation, like the current exhibition "Mary Obering: Selected Works 1983-1987" at Marisa Newman Projects in New York, where Obering illustrates natural wonders, like particle collisions, within her minimalist framework.

The work vibrates with the energy of Obering's experiences. "It's as if I entered another dimension," says Susan Cianciolo of Obering's paintings, evidence that her deep connection to the artistic community of New York is as strong as it was during the heady days of her youth.

—Emily Gallagher