

# *Erika Ranee: Visions of a New World*

Eva Díaz, 2021

Erika Ranee describes a careful type of observation, one likely familiar to those of us who spend time in urban spaces. To Ranee, “there’s a special way of looking in the city, your eyes are constantly moving. It’s a kind of quick looking... you know how to get glimpses of things without calling attention to yourself.” This is a perception of space and the objects in it that can readily be connected to her painting practice: a roving eye that swiftly takes in discreet details, subtle dramas, and other often overlooked aspects of the visual field, and later savors the unusual features that made them noteworthy, all the while allowing them their own presence, never subsuming them into a whole, systematic composition.

In works like *American Boy*, 2020, and *Just Resting My Eyes*, 2021, Ranee uses tessellated arrangements of forms to give a sense of this darting vision. Small panes of repeated elements recur in her canvases, for example, in *Just Resting My Eyes* a red web-like form appears six times in the work, popping in and out like a beautifully patterned coat noticed through the screen of a crowd. The motif flits in and out, glanced at surreptitiously, as if, according to Ranee, one “peeks into a little area, if the subway is full, and finds a small peephole.” Ranee often balances these bursts of color and pattern with chunks of negative space; in the case of these two paintings, black squares and rectangles placed throughout the canvas create a syncopated rhythm of rests, themselves bordered by an interlacing grid of lines that maps paths through the work, much the way that the lead came in a stained glass window create a lattice that both joins the panes into one plane, and separates areas of color from one another.

In *Little Man*, 2021, the trellis of connections that holds the tiles threatens to become a “thing” in and of itself, by nature of its vibrancy (here, a red melting into fuchsia), and its excitable proliferation through the work, like when a spider’s web catches the light, and nothing before or behind it can compete with its intricate brilliance. In *Touch My Hair*, 2021, Ranee explores what happens when the networked lines become so dominant that they do become an object, in this case when the yellow tendrils throughout the work converge into a central form, leaving only discreet compartments of the underlying paint showing through the net. Likewise, *My Right Foot*, 2020, employs a central red form that takes up more space than it should as a gridline, unfurling stems to the left and below, growing, or perhaps bleeding, into a shape that obscures more than demarcates the surrounding black. It’s a messy grid. To Ranee, describing her work as “accidental seems too random, but many of these areas happen in a happy, accidental way. When I start seeing something that I want, I start building it and accenting that area. However it unfolds, I want it to remain unfinished. That’s what keeps it exciting for me, keeping it uncertain. My paintings have a lot of life, and in person you can delve into the layers, to see little worlds emerge.” This notion of worlds emerging becomes heightened in works like *Blackbird*, *Home*, *Loose Threads*, *It Happened Here*, and *You’ve Got a Mouth Full of Funny Answers*, all from 2020, in which Ranee populates her grid lines with small dots, creating cellular subdivisions that seem like the glow of bioluminescent creatures linking up in delicate chains, or like so



many Mardi Gras beads dangling from the branches of a live oak.

To intensely notice something in a short burst, a mere glimpse even, and then to spend time privately appreciating that memory, recollecting and reconstructing the enticing flash of difference that attracted the eye in the first place; to compress the experience of apperception, and then prolong and re-experience vision in the perceptual reconstruction that is representation, to play out seeing as a procedure of creation, a style of making dictated not by planned execution but by an acceptance of the external world as intrinsically wondrous and inhuman, but also susceptible, perhaps, to being “captured” by human representation.

Sounds like a definition of Immanuel Kant’s sublime. Which is not the full story, this narrative of capture and human control, by perception, of that which has been seen. Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote about the difficult, unstable, and vulnerable process of “becoming” in Paul Cézanne’s work, the struggle of the human visual apparatus, ever vainly, to arrest the motif before it, stymied always by the exhaustion of the cones and rods in the eye, by the need to look away to find paint on a palette, by the binocularity of human vision that never has a thing right in front of it but jumping between two perspectives. Overall, painting is frustrated by the insufficiency of human vision, and that makes the immediacy of retinal apperception such a challenge to translate into perceptual discernment, and even more difficult to nudge the seen into the zone of cognition, that is, the reflection on things witnessed that happens in the “mind’s eye,” independent of the physical act of seeing. Apperception, perception, and cognition happen as a series of transformations. Here is the challenge of representation, this translation of visual experiences into external images, into art.

But perhaps that’s not the whole story either. Because in Raneé’s work we toggle from cognition back to the biology of vision. It isn’t solely a question of registering the visual world, and then representing it in form, but also a consideration of how the discursive field of language and ideas maps onto the never fully context-less forms before us, how language itself always converts abstraction into figures in its procedures of description. Why “touch my hair,” “American boy,” or “little man”? These titles are fraught with cultural reference that tug us between thinking and apperception in a dynamic circuit of assessing what we see, naming it, seeing it, and then imagining it to be different, possessing new names and embodying different relationships.

Raneé paraphrased her former professor Jack Whitten in a conversation with me: “I really don’t need to put the figure in here, to put the blackness here. It’s in the ideas when I’m making the work. Why do we have to have a single socio-political message? Why can’t we deal with form, with color?” Working afresh with color and form can re-envision the habituated ways by which we process the world, to creatively rearticulate its elements so that the tough hide of habit may be sloughed off. To then make a new world, built from the carefully observed details of the old.