



Chapter 3: Maps Necessary for a Walk in 4D #1, 2024

Cynthia Hawkins

BY ADAM SIMON

One's reality can be morphed into something else. — Cynthia Hawkins

Cynthia Hawkins's new paintings are mindscapes in which something happens. She has talked about the space in her paintings as the space of outer space. What matters here is not the idea of space that is infinite and contains planets and stars. What matters is that a formal, Greenbergian idea—space that reflexively affirms the shape and flatness of the support—has become one that suggests something described. Outer space evokes science, science fiction, childhood fantasy. However much we appreciate these paintings formally, they are not, at heart, formal paintings.

Sometime in the 1970s, around the time when Cynthia Hawkins was making her first abstract paintings, the terms that had defined abstract painting since Clement Greenberg wrote his essay "Modernist Painting" in 1960 shifted. At least some abstract painters were no longer requiring that their work eschew "the kind of space that recognizable objects can inhabit."¹ This was not a reversion to the semi-abstract narratives of the early twentieth century. It was a newfound freedom in which shapes could be associative and behave as actors in relational dramas. Abstract paintings could tell stories of a sort. One sees it in the work of Joan Snyder, Elizabeth Murray, or Terry Winters from that time, in which there is a sense of something observed even if that something can't be named. There were probably multiple paths leading to this heterodoxy: the irreverence of Pop Art, Philip Guston's 1970 exhibition incorporating cartoon imagery (to the dismay of most of his abstract painter peers), the challenge to the male canon coming from female abstract painters, the general climate of experimentation of that era. Regardless of how it came about, some abstract painters began to mine areas of the imagination previously unexplored by the genre. From a twenty-first century perspective, this may not seem so significant. There is no longer orthodoxy in relation to art, and no one way of making a painting is dominant. But this shift that took place fifty years ago is relevant to the work that Cynthia Hawkins is making today.



Chapter 3: Maps Necessary for a Walk in 4D #8, 2025



Chapter 3: Maps Necessary for a Walk in 4D #6, 2025

In a Hawkins painting, a shape is never just shape. A circle is often one of several and can evoke bubbles, balloons, balls. Three circles can be grouped to suggest a face, lines that intersect can suggest a trellis or a fence or scaffolding, rectangles attached to angled lines can suggest flags, a collection of gridded rectangles can suggest a pathway, a biomorphic form with a tubular appendage can suggest an article of clothing. But never are any of these more than a suggestion, "a glimpse," as de Kooning once said. A fleeting glimpse at that, because the eye moves on, continues to perambulate the whole, returning to each shape as, incrementally, everything coheres into an event being described. Or rather the setting for an event, in which forces are set in motion, interactions occur, collisions are imminent. Yet imminence doesn't really figure, because the moment is frozen. The contradiction of so much happening in a moment that is both timeless and frozen, frozen in time as well as space, might embody the fourth dimension alluded to in the title of this series, *Chapter 3: Maps Necessary for a Walk in 4D*.

Hawkins's paintings may have the sense of objects in outer space, but they could just as well represent a world seen under a microscope. Whether this world is that of the cosmos or a world too small to be visible, something in it has occurred or is occurring, and the viewer is in the middle of it. Everything in this shallow, layered space is seemingly being propelled toward the viewer. It could feel like an assault if these paintings weren't also exuberant and beautiful, if they didn't embody such interesting harmonies, affinities, and collisions, balancing warm and cool colors, opposing red with green, blue with orange in a way that keeps the viewer's eye moving across and through the space. Nothing in these paintings ever really settles. The space she creates is derived from the natural world but not of it, a space in which like connects to like and affinities create continuities. The operative terms could be dispersal, cacophony, propulsion, multiplicity. Drawing and color compete for territory, finding an uneasy balance in which there is no certainty, only movement. And yet this movement is also stillness. It is a painted surface after all, not cinema. The viewer's brain registers signals: a convex red line traverses a blue section of a bar which is not in fact a bar but an interstice between green triangles. Extreme perspectival grids indicating deep space are played against fragments of color and haphazard scrawled lines that project in front of what we think of as the picture plane. Large irregular shapes interweave among horizontal bands stretched from edge to edge of the rectangle. Solid colors combine with loose brushwork that provides tonality but is also the negation of previous decisions. This mix of flux, cacophony, and harmony evokes twentieth century composers: Rachmaninoff, Schoenberg, Messian. Ultimately, this balancing act cannot be resolved phenomenologically, only pictorially. Some shapes are both in front and behind other shapes. It only makes sense because it works according to the logic established in the painting. This is the difference between evidence and belief. We are convinced through being seduced. It may not be logical, but it is true.

Hawkins has at times in her life expressed an interest in astronomy and the cosmos—her father worked as a draftsman for Grumman Aerospace Corporation—and it's possible to take the title *Chapter 3: Maps Necessary for a Walk in 4D* as suggesting scientific exploration. Not that these paintings make it any easier to conceptualize a fourth dimension. That's something I find impossible. But one can imagine that she has described a dimension that is otherwise indescribable. This is not just to say that she creates a believable world, but rather that there are levels of reality that only art can access.



Chapter 3: Maps Necessary for a Walk in 4D #7, 2024



