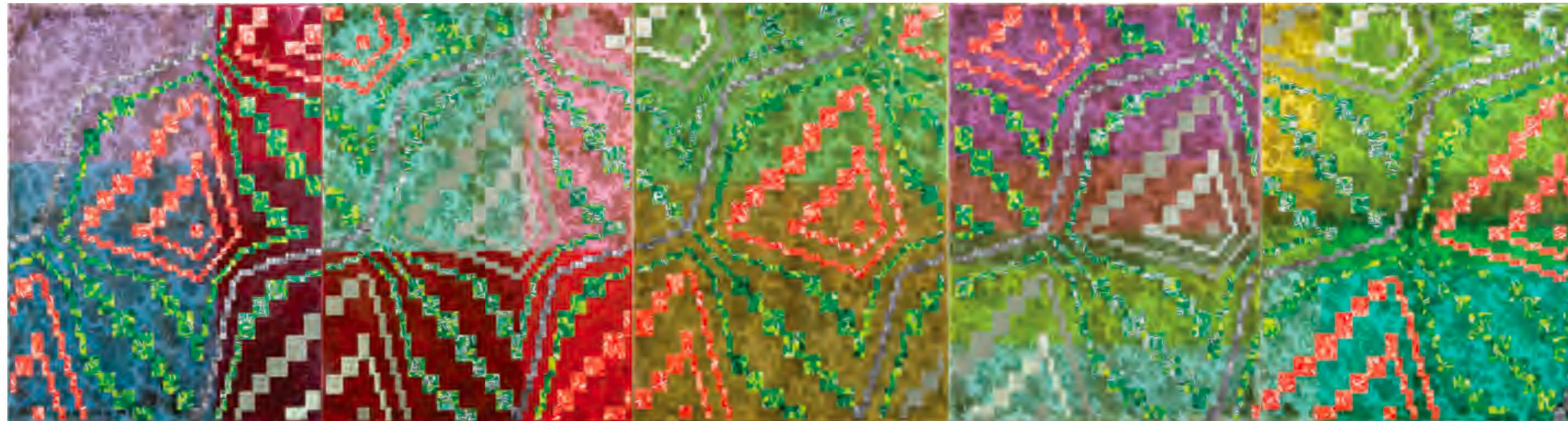


Studio Visit: Gerry Trilling

Marcus Cain



Gerry Trilling in her studio. Image courtesy Gail Lozoff.



My first encounter with Gerry Trilling's work was on a showcard that promoted a local gallery exhibition of her paintings in the mid-1990s and in the context of an early issue of this publication. Although Trilling has continued to create her artwork since that time, it was not until the end of 2006 that I would finally meet the artist and view her latest body of work firsthand, during a recent studio visit to her Crossroads studio space.

Former Grand Arts Director Sean Kelly introduced us one afternoon, in 2006, and casually mentioned that he and Trilling were organizing a series of informal studio visits, so Trilling could receive feedback on a body of work that represented a departure from the paintings I was familiar with. Although this latest body of work could be viewed as a departure, it can also be seen as a return to, or perhaps a synthesis of, some of the artist's earliest influences.

Gerry Trilling first came to Kansas City from St. Louis, Missouri, in 1986. Artistically, she has a background in painting, but it is a background that was arrived at through fiber. As a fiber artist, Trilling first showed at the Craft Alliance, an organization and gallery venue established in 1964 in St. Louis Central West End neighborhood — a place that continues to offer education and support for fine contemporary craft.

Before coming to Kansas City, Trilling studied fiber at the Chicago Art Institute, Chicago, IL, and drawing and painting at Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, before landing at the Kansas City Art Institute. Before coming to KCAL, however, Trilling also studied biology and literature — areas of interest she has retained — and she traveled to conduct workshops, research and independent study in papermaking and bookbinding. Once she began her studies at KCAL in the fiber department, she took a class with Painting Professor Lester Goldman (1942-2005), who eventually persuaded her to transfer into the painting department, where she completed her degree.

"I was trained as a painter but also as an object-maker ... and those paintings were objects to me," says Trilling, who began showing her first paintings locally at Jan Weiner Gallery upon graduating from KCAL in 1990. Trilling acknowledges a continued interest in this belief — in seeing the act of painting as just one of several means by which to create an object. "That's really a Lester [Goldman] thing ... you make something within a two-dimensional space and he would ask, 'now what would that thing look like if it were three-dimensional,' and then you would make it," says Trilling.

Over the years, Trilling's work has gone through several transitions of theme, media and dimensions. She has worked on a series of objects such as books made of wax, a haunting series of drawings of limbless figures in the early 1990s, and a series of paintings of shoes in the mid-1990s — iconic forms that appeared to serve as portrait surrogates. Prior to her current body of work, Trilling also created a sculptural series of armless dolls and environments for these figures, which were constructed initially of found materials and then carved and painted.

It was when Trilling recently rediscovered an old textile pattern book, used as an early reference during her weaving days, that she found something she simply could not get out of her mind. "It is a mid-century coverlet pattern called the *Jitterbug*, which I find very interesting because it appears to have no balance, and it fragments easily. To me, art-making is about fragmentation and then pulling things back together," says Trilling.

It is this *Jitterbug* pattern that runs throughout much of Trilling's new work. Coupled with some unusual materials and processes, these patterned pieces resemble painting in their structure. In fact, they seem to be as much about structure, materials and process

as they are about painting — painting in the context of such formal concerns as color, texture, light, space, transparency, illusion and depth. A modular approach is also part of this structure, which can be found from the tiniest elements to the patterned sequence shared between the largest panels. "I see patterns, how things relate to one another. When I returned to painting with this work, it was important to show those relationships using transparent materials and obvious construction of support materials," says Trilling.

As paintings, most of these pieces employ traditional wooden stretcher bars over which are affixed layers of transparent and/or translucent materials including nylon grid netting, plastic construct fencing, colored acetate, vinyl, printed fabric and meticulously cut-and-glued squares of colored cardboard and paper. "To me, it reads as a complex but singular visual experience. The strata are visually and structurally integrated even though they retain a unique reference," says Trilling regarding the material layers of her work. "I think the integration of visual and physicality, a medium as old and complex as weaving, combined with something as slick and straightforward as vinyl, the idea of integration in contrast with infinite fragmentation are what's interesting to me."

Among the utilitarian nature of Trilling's studio materials, her cut squares of cardboard Mountain Dew- and Pepsi-box containers hold a prominent place, as they tend to set the tonal palette for each work by virtue of their bold manufactured colors. Trilling began using these cardboard boxes as a result of drinking so much of the product they contained. (In fact, we shared a few cans of the stuff during my visit.) Over time, the empty boxes accumulated in her studio until she needed an inexpensive material to try an experiment. "The material offered a certain weight and rigidity to the work that I liked," says Trilling of her initial impetus for its use. "You could say that I now have a special relationship with PepsiAmericas and I can get all the containers I need, in whatever color I need. My support comes from the regional distributorship."

In addition to this obvious if unorthodox influence, Trilling also acknowledges other sources of inspiration such as the nature-based drawings by German zoologist, biologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), Brice Marden's (1938-) calligraphic paintings, and Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui's (1944-) intricate, blanket-like painted wood and mixed media sculptures.

Through this work, Trilling allows the origins of her materials to speak for themselves in combined variations, as they simultaneously deconstruct into functional and formal grids of visually abstract information — discreet layers that refract, reflect, absorb and trap light within each piece through organizations of texture and color. Even the branding identity printed upon the soda containers is deconstructed into gradients of light to dark green, red, blue, orange, purple and gray that jitter across the surfaces of multi-panel arrangements.

"It is not about meaning; it is not about fiber. It is about painting," says Trilling. It could also be said that it is about returning to one's roots of inspiration with both informed and fresh eyes and reinventing oneself. •

Facing page, center: *Transparent #1* (detail), 2006, plastic netting, orange caution fencing, colored transparent vinyl and Mountain Dew cartons, 48" x 36". Image courtesy E.G. Schempf.

Two-page spread: *Fifth Season* (five panels), 2007, plastic netting, fabric, colored transparent vinyl and Mountain Dew cartons, grasscloth and painted chipboard, dimensions are 48" x 180". Image courtesy E.G. Schempf.