

KENT STEPHENS WRITER & CRITIC

Kent Stephens

BY FIRE: Audrey Stone's Intimations of Mortality, inspired by Leonard Cohen

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By Fire paintings, Audrey Stone, exhibit 2021, Morgan Lehman Gallery

By 1958, Mark Rothko had become increasingly resistant to discussing his process and labeling his genre of painting, while at the same time was proselytizing about the spiritual quest behind it all. That year he agreed to do

a talk at the Pratt Institute, where he surprised the audience by offering a near-practical “recipe” composed of seven ingredients for creating a work of art. The first ingredient was “There must be a clear preoccupation with death – intimations of mortality...Tragic art, romantic art, etc., deals with the knowledge of death.”



No doubt some listeners rebelled at this formula – “What’s Pollock’s ‘No. 5’ got to do with death, Mark?” – but on consideration the logic is inescapable. As Shakespeare said to his patron in Sonnet 60 about his nemesis, Time:
*“...nothing stands but for his scythe to mow:
And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.”*

Art is man’s triumphant shaken fist at the inevitable. Keat’s bold lover and unravished bride will never consummate, but also never fade: after each generation wastes, they remain, immobilized and immortalized on the Grecian urn, “a friend to man.” The intimation of mortality lurks behind all human striving, and thus any work of art. You don’t have to have read too much Nietzsche - and Rothko had - to aspire to be a tragic Dionysian. The way to defy human fate is to create an experience, a “friend to man,” that unites viewers beyond your single self, inspiring them, giving them the seventh ingredient in the recipe: “Hope. 10%. to make the tragic concept more endurable.”





("By Fire," Audrey Stone, 2019)

In her recent exhibition, "By Fire," at the Morgan Lehman Gallery in New York, painter Audrey Stone succeeds on her tragic Dionysian mission. Through a visual and conceptual gematria, as we shall discover, she converts Death into Life.

Several events underlay or prompted this series of paintings: the passing of Stone's mother in 2019; the outbreak of the Covid pandemic and the resulting fatalities; the record-setting devastation of the 2020 wildfires in Australia and California; the destruction of the artist's father's home in a conflagration; the suffocation of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis police,

and especially a song the artist turned to as a balm in her own grief, the song which gives the exhibition its title, Leonard Cohen's "Who By Fire."

Raised an Orthodox Jew, Cohen wrote "Who By Fire" as his own adaptation of a prayer said on the high Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: the *Unataneh Kotef*. On the Jewish New Year, according to the tradition, the Book of Life is opened and in it are inscribed the names of all those who will live and die, as well as "how many will be created," during the coming year. Then, on the Day of Atonement, those names are "sealed" in the Book. Cohen said about the song, "In that prayer are cataloged all the various ways in which you can quit this veil of tears. The melody is, if not actually stolen, certainly derived from the melody that I heard in the synagogue as a boy."



("By Water," Audrey Stone, 2019)

Stone's canvasses, each an identical 40" by 30", are her geometric abstract renderings of the means of death and so named, many from Cohen or the traditional prayer, but several original with the artist: Fire (three different renderings), Water, Sunshine, Night, Brave Assent or High Ordeal, Slip, Solitude, Hand, Stone, Darkness, Heart, Breath/Air, Sleep, Morning, Song, and Six.



("By Song," Audrey Stone, 2020)

The regimentation of the format and the precisely distanced hanging in a single rank around the gallery amplify the vibrant diversity of the individual paintings. This is portraiture, but instead of faces, Stone gives us fateful circumstances depicted in geometry and color. Visual excitement in the "By Fire" paintings is often most intense at the borders, the places where bands or blocks of color meet.



(By Slip, 2020, Audrey Stone)

In some cases Stone is content with simple juxtaposition, but often she creates flares or vibrations at these boundaries, as in the diagonal horizons of “By Slip” and “By Song.”

Staring at several of these works, such as “By Fire 3,” (*below*) is like contemplating a James Turrell, but Stone’s magic is effected two dimensionally, in acrylic or Flashe paint.



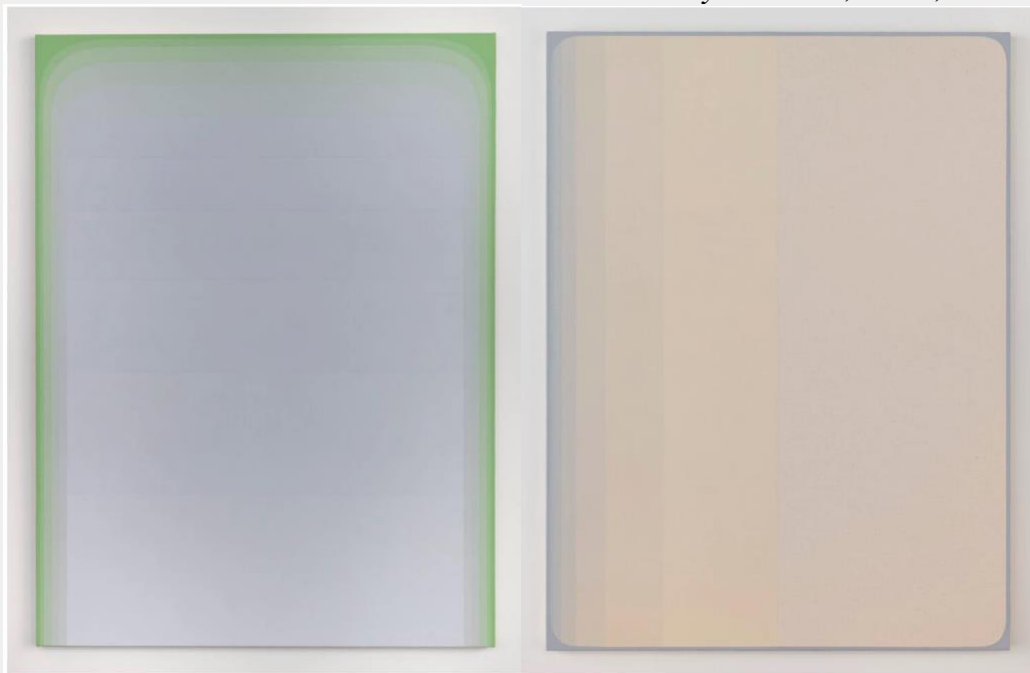
The use of lacunas of unpainted space - absence made visible - in several pieces is a repeated memento mori.



By Heart, 2020, Audrey Stone

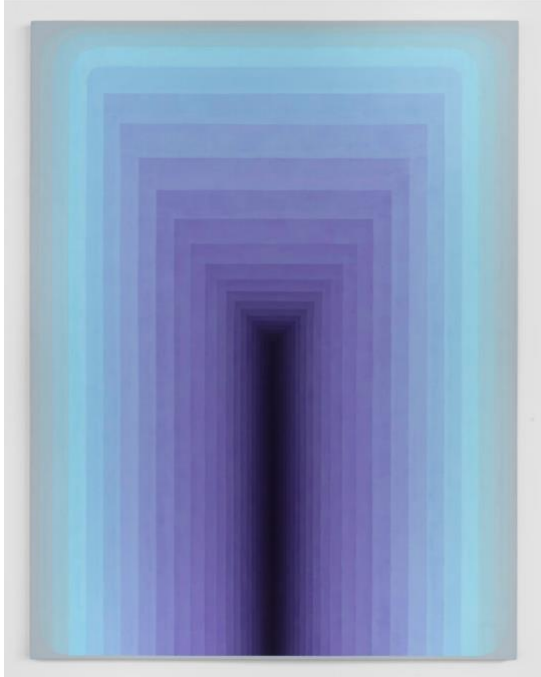
“By Solitude” plays on the tonality of the canvas itself, drawing the viewer closer to perceive a subtle banded spectrum that grades into absence.

By Solitude, 2020, Audrey Stone



By Morning, 2020, Audrey Stone

In "By Morning" light just begins to suffuse the edges of a grey expanse, the "flash of green" that can occur at sunrise. The title also evokes its homonym, "mourning": sometimes one feels one can die from grief, each new dawn is a new trial, a new day to face without the departed. Stone herself talks about "anticipation," survivors awaiting the end: her mother did indeed die in the morning. The green periphery of seeping dawn may be Rothko's hope, perhaps not so much as 10%.



(By Breath, By Air, 2020, Audrey Stone)

The curt titles belie a wealth of associations. "By Breath, By Air" summons both the transmission of the coronavirus and the "I can't breathe" slogan of the Black Lives Matter movement that originated with the death of Eric Garner and reached its apotheosis with the strangulation of George Floyd.

By Six, 2020, Audrey Stone

In addition to memorializing personal losses for the artist in 2019, "By Six" refers to the pandemic update of the Kevin Bacon formula: each of us is no more than six degrees of separation from a hospital worker.

"By Stone" is signature block, inspired meta-joke, and visual epithet for our contentious culture all in one.





By Stone, 2020, Audrey Stone

The canvases number eighteen. This is Audrey Stone's redemptive gematria, her physical translation of the Hebrew letters that spell "chai" – meaning Life.

Gematria is the ancient kabbalistic practice of translating words or phrases from the Torah and other texts into numerical equivalents. By comparing like sums to like, the Jewish mystic uncovers hidden meanings. According to gematria, the letter *yod* is 10 and the letter *chet* is 8, so the numerical value of *chai*, "life," is 18.

Thus, by creating eighteen compelling visions of "the various ways you can quit this veil of tears," Audrey Stone transforms multiforms of death into a collective assertion of Life. May "By Fire" have a long one.





Audrey Stone has been exhibited widely across the United States, as well as in Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, England, France, and Japan. Her work is in the collections of Cleveland Clinic, Credit Suisse, Fidelity Investments, New York Presbyterian Hospital, Copelouzos Art Museum (Athens, Greece), and the Amateras Foundation (Sofia, Bulgaria). She lives in Brooklyn, NY.

The “By Fire” paintings are represented by the Morgan Lehman Gallery, 526 West 26th Street, 4th Floor, New York, NY, 10001. 212-268-6699, phone, 212-268-6766, fax;

www.morganlehmangallery.com. More of Audrey's work can be seen at www.audreystone.net

(Artwork photography by Adam Reich. Installation photos by Morgan Lehman Gallery. Portrait photo of Audrey Stone by Jason Roth.)