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Where Painting Can Live

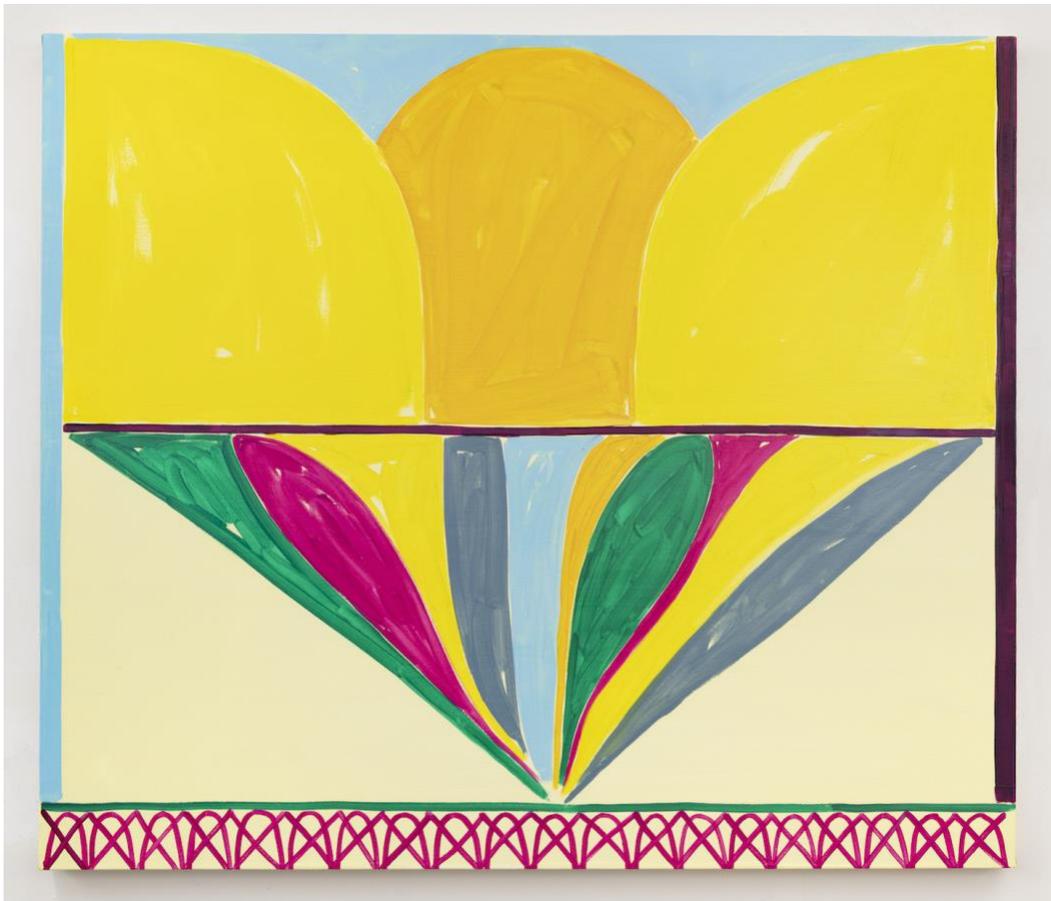
Jason Stopa's desire to infuse his paintings with joy mixes sophistication and innocence without privileging either one.



by John Yau
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Jason Stopa, "Sound of Joy" (2021), oil on canvas, 40 x 47 inches (all images courtesy the artist and Morgan Lehman Gallery)

Architecture, particularly iron gates and cyclone fencing; a hand-painted wall on which brightly colored paintings are placed; abstract motifs inspired by pop culture and cartoons; solid shapes made of cheery colors, which bring to mind the cutouts of Henri Matisse and a kindergarten playroom full of toys; the paintings of Jonathan Lasker, Nicholas Krushenick, and Patricia Treib; the relationship between the sets and the costumes worn by Catherine Deneuve in the wonderful musical film *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964), directed by Jacques Demy — these are just some of the associations that Jason Stopa's paintings and environments have conjured up for me over the years. More importantly, when I look at them, the paintings quickly take over and the associations begin to fade into the background, becoming part of the personal and collective buzz that accompanies all things found in culture. They are not about citation or ironic parody.

Stopa's desire for joy and the belief that painting can deliver this state is sincere. What is interesting about his ambition is that he has been able to mix sophistication and innocence without privileging either one. Living in a world of disillusionment, a society of failed and false promises, and an art world periodically punctuated by declarations of the death of painting — all evidence of our embittered state — it is difficult to believe that painting is capable of transporting us to a state of bliss, however brief, much less attaining it. But this is exactly what Stopa achieves in *Jason Stopa: Joy Labyrinth*, at Morgan Lehman (May 13–July 31, 2021), his debut exhibition with this gallery.



Jason Stopa, "Joy Labyrinth" (2020), oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches

Saturated blue, hot pink, magenta, fire-engine red, butter yellow — Stopa applies his tropical palette to a monochromatic ground that ranges from bubblegum pink to pale yellow and blue, recalling a summer day. He tends to divide his compositions into an upper and lower world. In the bottom half, he might make a series of Xs running from side to side, reminiscent of a fence.

In "Joy Labyrinth" (oil on canvas, 72 by 60 inches, 2020), everything directs the viewer's attention to move up the painting's surface, starting with the row of blue lines that form diamonds,

spanning the painting's bottom edge. A red line separates the diamonds from the rest of the painting.

Above the red line is a bowl-like shape, divided into stripes in various colors, halted by a green dividing line that stretches across the painting at the mid point. A line in the same green hue runs along the right edge, stopping at the red line. The multicolored bowl-like shape reminded me of the bottom part of a hot air balloon.



Jason Stopa, "Roman Garden Arch" (2020), oil on canvas, 28 x 23 inches

In the top half, Stopa divides the painting vertically into equal-sized sections. The right rectangle is loosely filled in with violet paint applied to a white ground, which peeks through. The left rectangle is mostly red, but a sky-blue section in the top right corner forms a triangle with a curved side that abuts the red area. The blue opens the painting up. A pale yellow line along the left edge mirrors the green on the right. The bands both divide the painting into distinct areas and become borders within the painting. This is where Stopa's painterly intelligence comes through. Repetition is interrupted and the suggestion of a blue sky adds another dimension of meaning into the work.

The interplay between line and shape, abstract motif and the overall painting, amounts to a masterful orchestration of distinct parts, each of which is given enough space to breathe.

In the largely pink painting "Roman Garden Arch" (2020), Stopa paints a robin's-egg-blue line angling in from the lower right edge. About two thirds from the bottom edge, it makes a right angle to become a straight horizontal line that halts two thirds of the way across. A lighter blue abstract arch rises up from that point. There are shapes and lines in the architectonic space above the blue line, which we might read as both abstract and referential, though we don't know to what. At the same time, we may find ourselves asking: what are the shapes and lines that exist in the implied space below the blue line?



Jason Stopa, "A Portrait of Luis Barragán" (2021), oil on canvas, 28 x 23 inches

Stopa's ability to create a space populated by abstract things that are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, without resolving in favor of legibility or illegibility, infuses the painting with its particular tension.

In "Portrait of Luis Barragán" (2021) and "Gate II" (2020), Stopa has placed two rectangles against a striped ground above a diamond grid, evocative of cyclone fencing. The former's ground is red, marked by vertical blue lines. The rectangle on the left is yellow and contains a rhythmic jumble of elliptical black lines.

The one on the right is composed of two vertical rows of four right-angled charcoal-gray triangles against a pink ground, with the exception of the second-to-left triangle on the bottom row, which is on a green ground (or juxtaposed with an inverted triangle). Finally, above the two rectangles is a small pink horizontal rectangle outlined with thick yellow paint, almost like an exit sign.

While we can assign a real-life counterpart to each section of the painting, from the fencing to the paintings within a painting to the sign on the wall, together they don't add up. What is inside and what is outside? The fact that Stopa is inspired by Luis Barragán, a great architect who was interested in light and color, and wanted to make "emotional architecture" rather than efficient, functional domiciles, reveals part of what the artist is striving for in his work.

Seeing the work that Stopa has done since 2015, I am impressed by the fact that he has never focused on developing a signature composition, as many contemporary abstract painters do: there is no loose grid that he can fill in, for example, or predictable use of thick paint. The casualness with which he applies the paint does not seem contrived because it has not hardened into a repeated device. In making paintings in which he interrupts the repetitive pattern, Stopa seems to be reminding himself to not take anything for granted, including the next step. This is what makes the joy in his paintings feel real.



Jason Stopa, "Primary Cathedral" (2021), oil on canvas, 41 x 35 inches

Jason Stopa: Joy Labyrinth continues at Morgan Lehman Gallery (526 West 26th Street, Suite 410, Chelsea, Manhattan) through July 31.