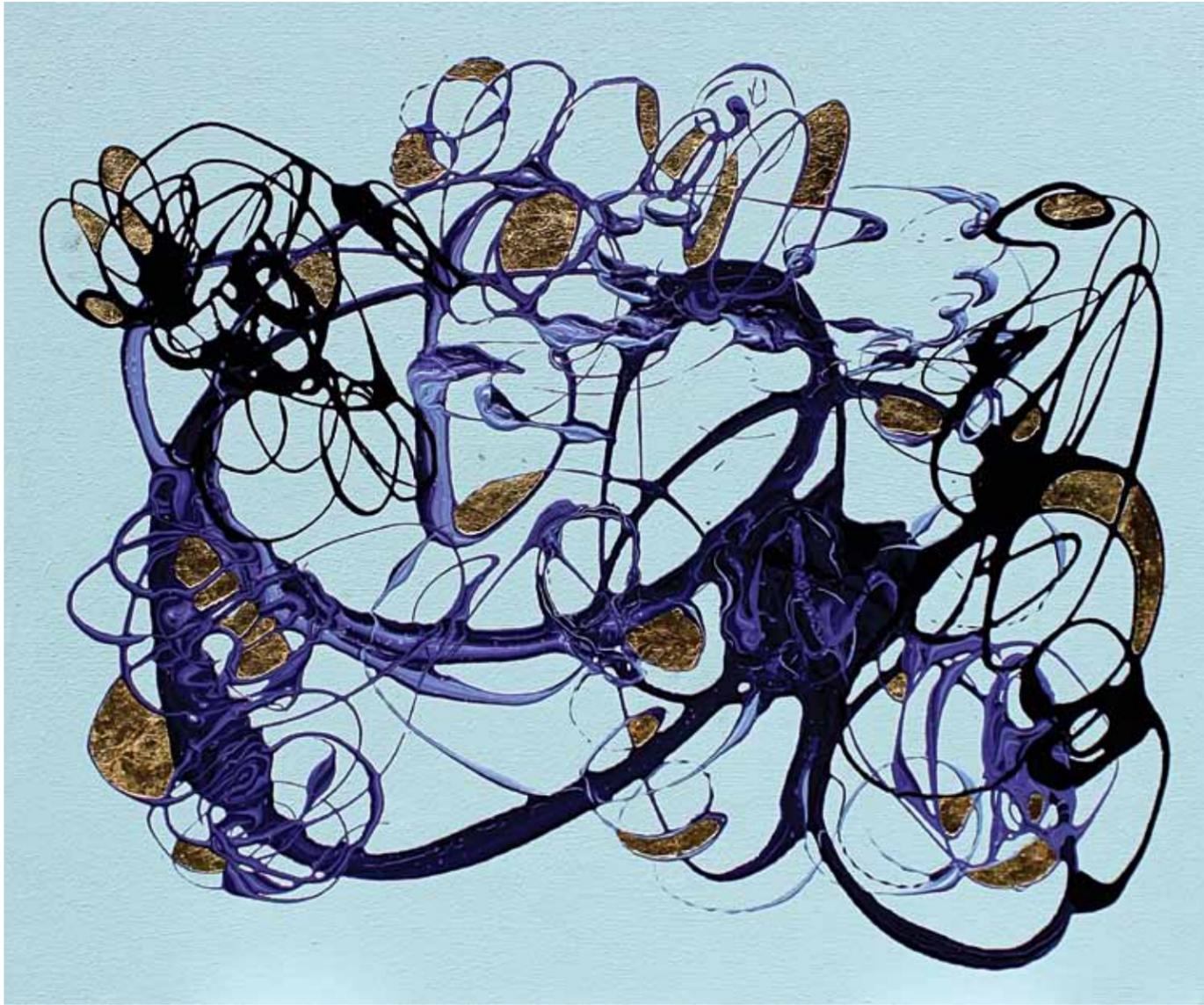




SERENA BOCCHINO

BY SHANA BETH MASON

There's absolutely nothing wrong with a bit of craziness in contemporary art. There is too often a fetish for reduction, dilution, or complete erasure from the field of vision. Scribbles, twists, pastel colors, and enamel paint aren't only reserved for elementary school classrooms or the few havens of respected Art Brut/Naïf practitioners like Jean Dubuffet or Basquiat. New Jersey-based artist Serena Bocchino doesn't discard any of these terms when applied to her practice, but she is firmly convinced that her paintings are "independent" and "free" and has the internal dynamics to prove it.



The core of Bocchino's oeuvre is centered around line-based paintings, reeling across paper, canvas, and mirrors in endless loops and backflips. As time has progressed, her works have become less color-dependent, presenting more external discipline and more internal fire. Bocchino attributes this change to her decision (which she pinpoints at roughly three years ago) to utilize enamel-based paint versus oils. "Enamel does have that seductive, shimmering appeal to it. It's difficult to get away from. I struggled to part with oil paint, to be honest, but enamel was too tempting." Enamel, historically, has been a tool for embellishing, luxuriating, and sexualizing anything it touches. It is used to coat jewels, fingernails and toenails, and fine furniture. Its sheen is just shy of being mirror-like: it is meant to draw attention to the thing it adorns. It

so happens that enamel proves to be an interesting alternative for Bocchino, relating more specifically to its physical appearance versus its practicality.

To give paint a kind of life force, to give line and structure more humanized adjectives such as "fleshy," "muscular," or "chiseled," these are linguistic risks Bocchino seems more than willing to take. Forcibly moulding lines into hectic swirls and orbits (their heaviness and stroke quality are more suited to a calligraphy pen than a paintbrush) is even more dangerous for the trained artist, as composition tends to collapse under the weight of frantic motion. Yet, Bocchino is just able to rein in the madness to the point of the viewer capably regarding the work as a dynamic exercise versus a desperate melee of gestures. If anything, Bocchino's can-

vases recall the aching ecstasy of Barney's *Drawing Restraint* series: individual experiments, which actually look like the artist had to try with all his might not to burst out in a Pollock or Klein-like Expressionist hysteria. This might be the most satisfying element of Bocchino's work. It is not about the iconic artists that her works resemble, but more importantly it is that she is nothing like Twombly, Pollock, Klein, Dubuffet, and certainly not Barney. She is anti-hysterical and anti-historic. The lines of the *Fever* and *Twirl* series (ironically titled) are bold and multi-colored but not immediately suggestive of mythic, unbridled chaos.

White-on-white and enamel-on-mirror works like *Pure Fall* and *Yes* are strong indicators of a sculptural affinity, as they travel in weighty trails across highly vivid, reflective surfaces.



She has not shied away from color either, evidenced by earlier *iPop* and *Romance* series, apparently drawing their lifeblood from Jazz music. The *Romance* series is an homage in color to the twisting, buoyant riffs heard from John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and Charlie Parker (refer to: Parker's "Crazeology" from 1947). Bocchino's paintings refer to the more lively upswings of Jazz versus its mellow, euphoric counterparts. This low-key level of bliss is more perceivable in her *Fever* works: so-named for the Little Willie John song (from 1956) covered by crooner Peggy Lee two years later. The thumping bass line, the crisp snaps, and the velvet vocals of Miss Lee could all be ascribed to the steady motion of Bocchino's tracery. Her most recent works, however, show a calming trend: lines less scribbled and far more pronounced. The current extension of her *Twirl* paintings bears a marked maturation of compositional and color values: colors are carefully assigned to specific spaces on the surface versus an aimless smattering of bright pinks, blues, and yellows. The ancient

technique of gold-leafing further adds to the indulgent nature of the paintings; combined with enamel, they might as well be visual aphrodisiacs. They could be misconstrued as meaningless aesthetic babble, but Bocchino does not mumble nor spew the musical language folded into the artwork: she speaks it loudly and clearly.

Serena Bocchino received her Master of Arts degree from New York University in 1985. Prior to this, she pursued additional studies at Wroxton College, Oxford (with a concentration in Fine Arts) and a 1982 research sabbatical spanning the cities of Moscow, Leningrad, and Suzdal in Russia. She participated in MoMA P.S.1's International Residency Program in 1987, and she won the Prix de Roma that same year. In 1989, she was the recipient of the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant and the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award. Solo exhibitions of her work have been hosted at venues in New York, San Francisco, St. Louis, and New Orleans. Her work has been included at group

exhibitions held at Princeton University's Women's Studies Gallery, the Islip Museum of Art, and the New Jersey Center for Visual Arts. Writers and critics such as Jill Conner, Donald Kuspit, and Barry Schwabsky have contributed catalogue essays, describing and praising Bocchino's body of work. Publications such as *The New York Times*, *Art in America*, *the San Francisco Chronicle*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Village Voice* reside in her published bibliography. She has participated in the Art in Embassies Program (in Lima, Peru and Washington, D.C.), and her work is held in the public collections of PricewaterhouseCoopers (New York), Duff & Phelps (Chicago), the Irma and Bill Seitz Collection at the Smithsonian (Washington, D.C.), the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University (New Brunswick), the St. Louis Art Museum, and the Springfield Museum of Art (Springfield, Ohio). Her work is currently on view in New York at a group exhibition entitled AS | Artists Studios at 33 Orchard, curated by Jill Conner. **IA**