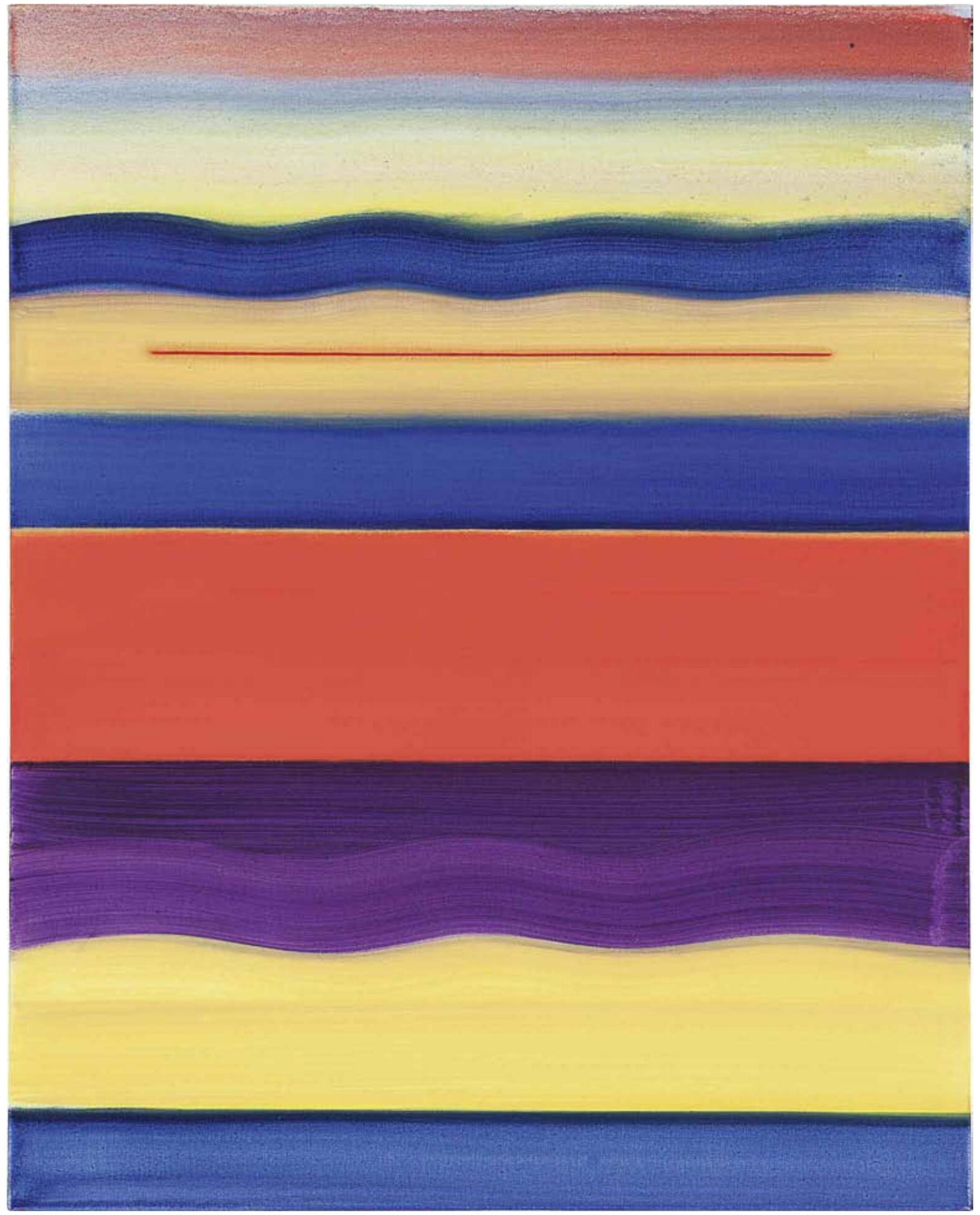


Luminous Gestures:
New Paintings by Elizabeth Osborne

Carter Ratcliff

We always ask what a painting is: abstract or figurative? Gestural or geometric? There is a long list of such questions. I don't deny that they need to be asked and yet I think there is a better question: not what a painting *is* but what it *does.* Of course, every painting does many things and does them all at once. This presents a problem for language, which is sequential, and no starting point is inevitable—not when language is faced with paintings as intricately balanced, as richly unified, as Elizabeth Osborne's. Every starting point feels a bit arbitrary, so there is nothing for it but to jump in with the observation that Osborne's *Currents,* 2012 (fig. 1), does something extraordinary. It states the logic of landscape—or perhaps I should say *seascape*—and then subverts it.

To see what I mean, look at the blue stripe along the lower edge of *Currents.* We simply cannot help seeing this as a stretch of ocean separated from a yellow sky by a very clear horizon line. And we see the same configuration—the same motif—in the upper half of the painting. Between these two "seascapes" a red and a purple stripe intervene with so much shimmering energy that we focus on color itself. With a rhythm of chromatic intervals carrying vision into the painterly surge of *Currents,* we luxuriate in contrasts of high key and low, brushy texture and solid pigment, straight edges and serenely wavy ones. Watching the elements of this painting interact with such resourcefulness, we lose track of Osborne's

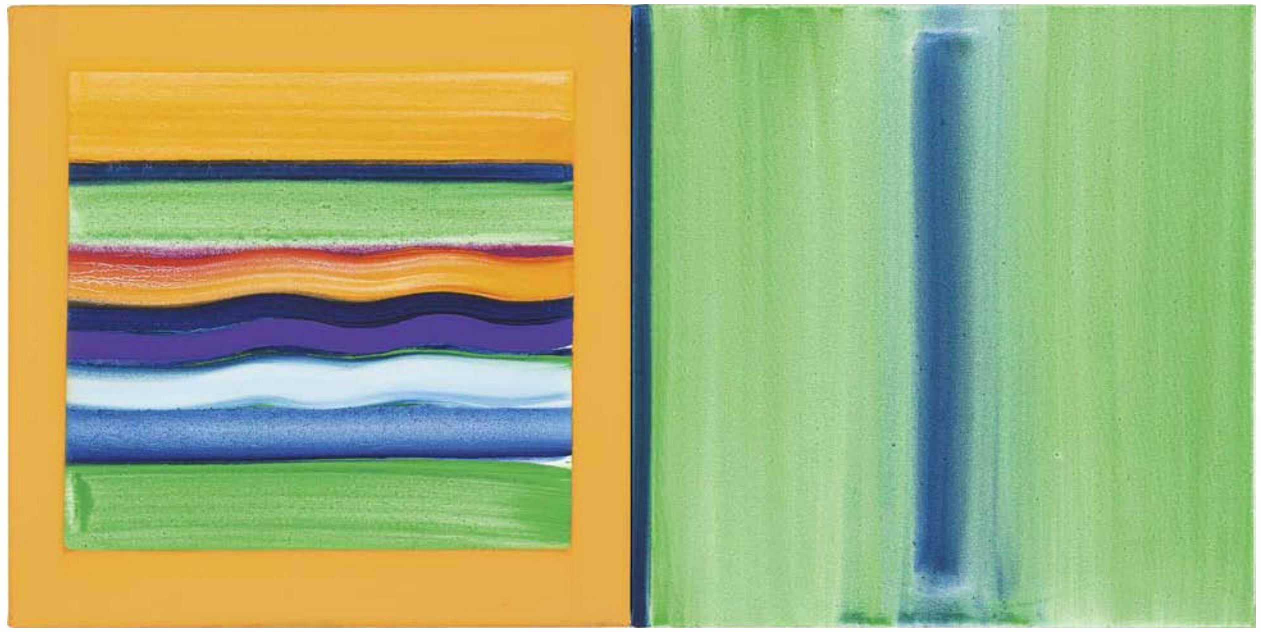
1 **Currents,** 2012
oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches

allusions to seascape. Yet they resurface on occasion, reminding us of the world outside the painting and then merging with the light the painter generates with her unpredictable array of colors.

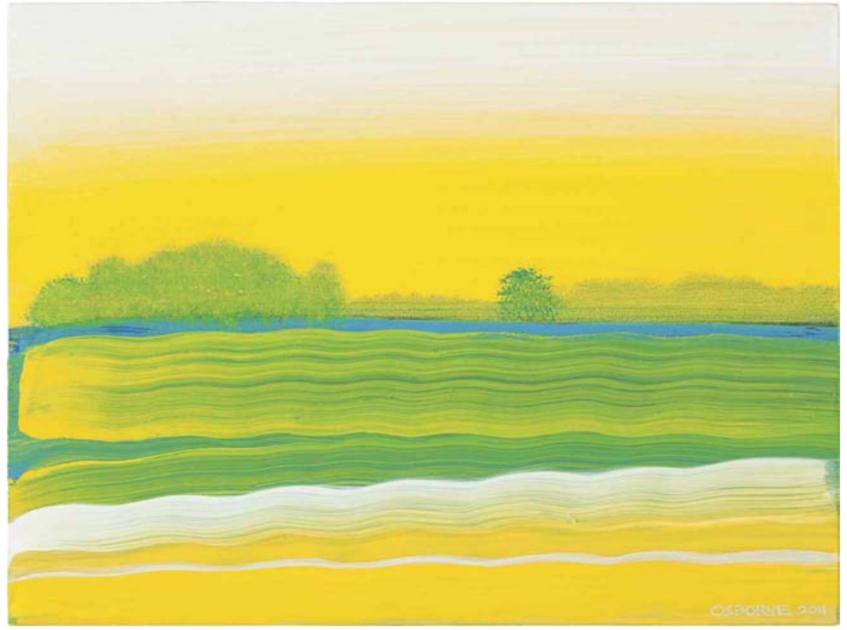
Quinacridone, 2012–13 (fig. 4, p. 27), is particularly rich in the layered textures that have appeared in Osborne's paintings in recent seasons. Here, a color is not simply what it is. It is what is by virtue of doing something—in this case, risking an involvement with another color. The risk being that it will be lost or muddied as textures intermingle, but the opposite happens in *Quinacridone* and throughout this exhibition. The artist's colors gain intensity from their intermingling, and sometimes we feel the implication of a third, invisible color.

We can, if we like, read hints of landscape into the left-hand panel of the diptych entitled *Autumn Garden,* 2013 (fig. 2), and there is a hint of architecture in the window-like rectangle that reveals of the horizontal stripes of the garden. Thus the warm yellow field wherein the garden floats must be a wall. But is it, really? Couldn't it just as easily be sunlit space or sheer color—a pictorial premise on which the horizontal stripes within the rectangle base their thoroughly visual speculations about the affinities linking green and blue? For that is what successful paintings do. They prompt speculations and conjectures. They stir up an atmosphere of possibility.

Zooming back a bit, to bring Osborne's earlier work into view, we see that the forms in her newest work have been evolving for years. And in paintings from just a few seasons ago we see her using those forms to picture mountains and buildings and trees. Her evolution to non-figurative stripes and fields of color has been seamless, which suggests that she leaves behind nothing crucial when she leaves out images of recognizable things. What, then, is crucial to her art?



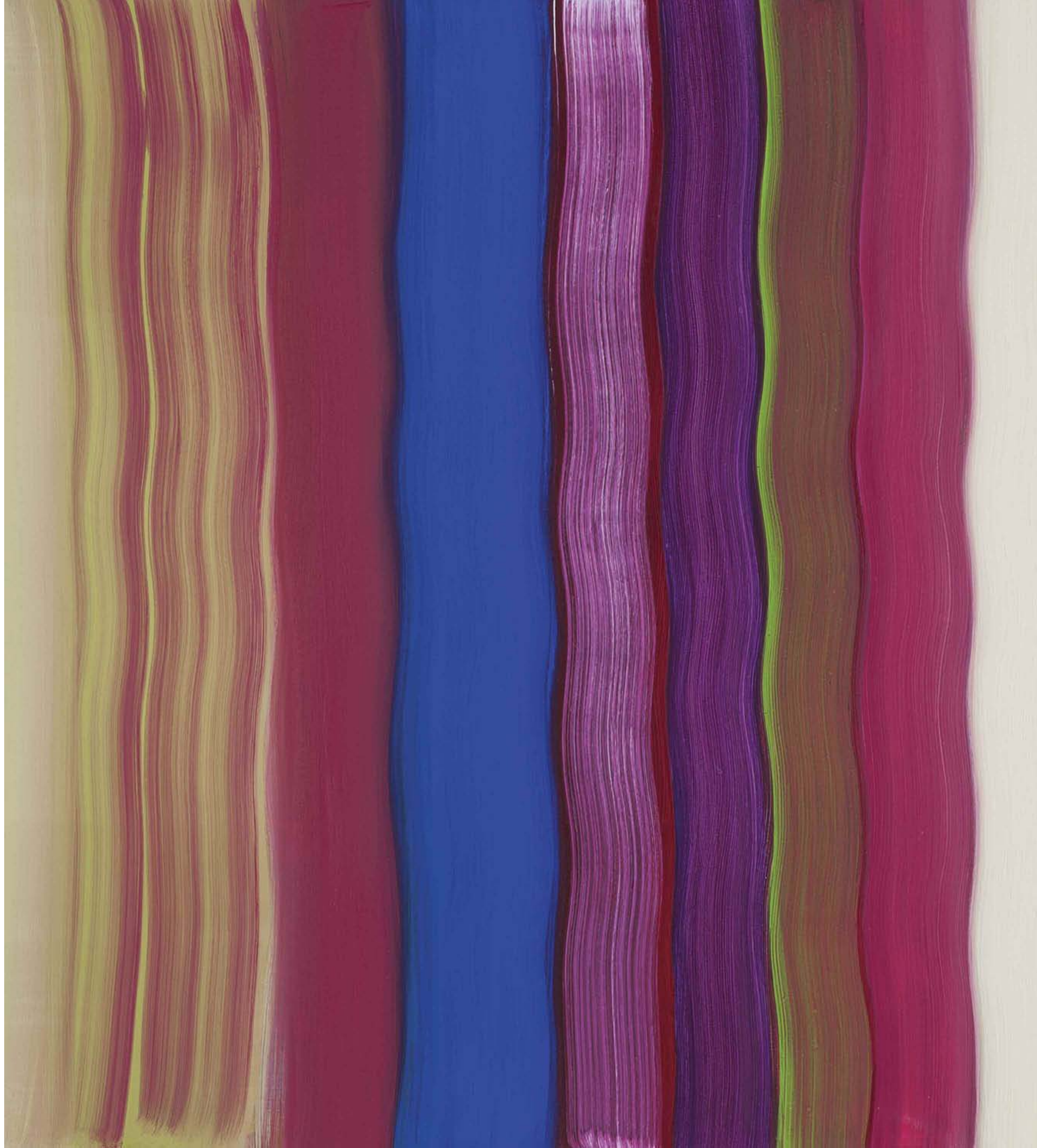
2 **Autumn Garden,** 2013
oil on canvas, diptych, 24 x 48 inches

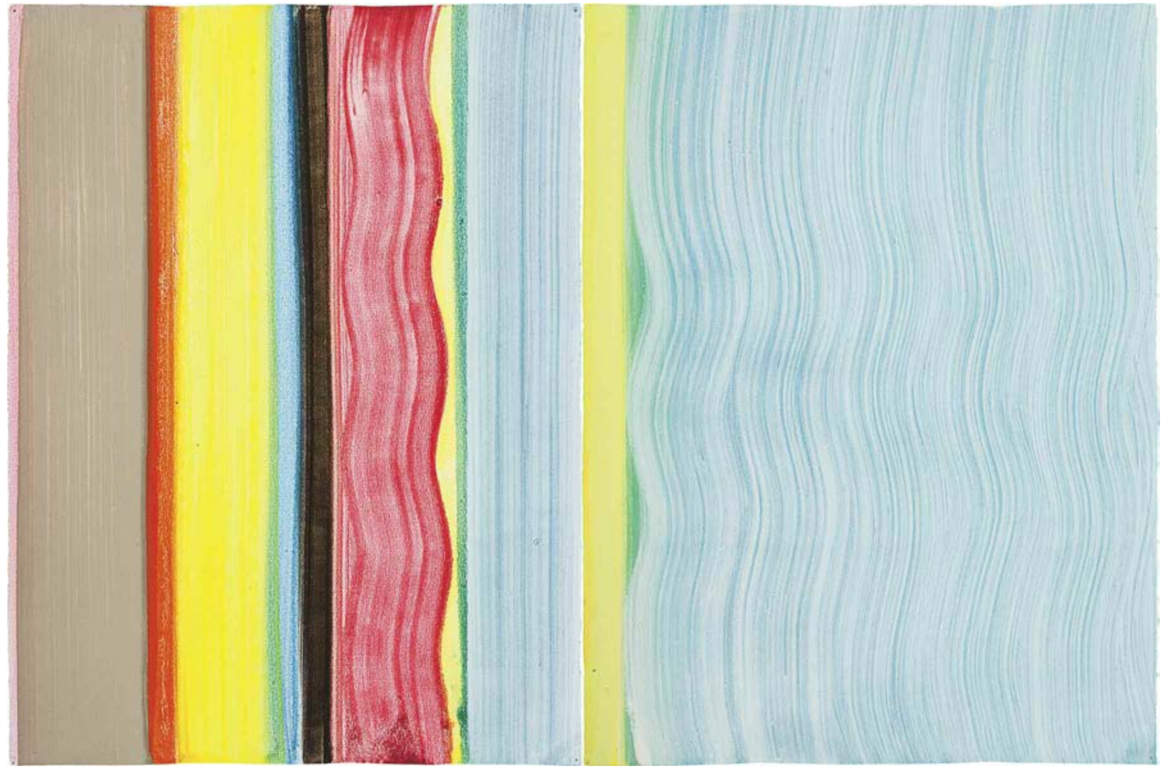


Drawing further back, we get to a point where early American modernist painters come into view. I am thinking, in particular, of Arthur Dove, Charles Demuth, and Georgia O'Keefe. For some of their paintings display, like Osborne's, patterns of color that hover on the verge of coalescing into land- or sky- or seascapes. It might be better, though, to say that these patterns hover on the edge of an escape from representation. Modernism, after all, was a form of liberation. Still, I am not suggesting that we draw a direct line from O'Keeffe and company in the 1910s to Osborne in the present. No such line can be drawn because something intervened between her and that earlier band of artists, an idea so powerful that it splits the history of twentieth-century art at the midpoint.

3 **Cadmium Yellow Day,** 2013
oil on board, 12 x 16 inches

4 **Quinacridone** (detail), 2012–13





5 **Wave,** 2013
oil on paper, diptych, 24 x 36 ½ inches

The key figure is Jackson Pollock. The Minimalists read his drip paintings one way, color-field painters like Helen Frankenthaler read them in another, very different way, and yet the two readings agreed on one point: the canvas must be acknowledged as a physical thing. A palpable object. O'Keeffe and her generation treated that palpability as incidental. After Pollock, painters treat it as an inevitable fact. To paint is, in part, to come to terms with the flatness and rectangularity of the canvas—and in these new paintings we see Osborne doing that with every touch of her brush. And with her forms. The window-like openings in *Autumn Garden, Late Night,* 2012–13 (p. 39), and *Citron,* 2012–13 (p. 41), are of course variations on the shapes of the canvases where they appear and her elegantly extended brushstrokes are echoes of the edges that enclose the painted surface.

Osborne's stripes echo the edges of the canvas even when they are wavy, as if to say: yes, you edges are inescapable premises of my art, you are basic and must be acknowledged, yet you have no dictatorial powers and I will acknowledge you in my own, distinctively sinuous way. Wavy or straight, her color-stripes are immediately recognizable as hers, which means that she assimilated the idea of the canvas as an object and in the process reinvented it. As we follow a sequence of Osborne's colors, tracing the subtleties of theme and variation, of visual rhyme and slant rhyme, we feel the varying speed and pressure of her brush. We feel, in other words, that she is alive not only to the edges of the canvas but to its tangible surface. Nonetheless, as we become more thoroughly entranced by the grand flicker of her colors, our attention shifts away from physical fact to the quality of light that pervades all of Osborne's work. So here is something else these paintings do: they acknowledge the edges and the surface in a manner that makes the canvas less a tangible object than the site of the sheer luminosity that is, I believe, the crucial element of her art.

Whether Osborne paints flowers or mountains or nothing recognizable, her goal is to evoke light. Or let us say that light has always been and continues to be her subject, one that draws her into the border region where the abstract and the figurative meet and sometimes merge. So there is no need to say that she is or is not a representational painter—not, at least, in our familiar sense of that phrase. Yet there is a more elusive way in which her art is indeed representational. To understand that, we must look at some earlier writers' comments on music.

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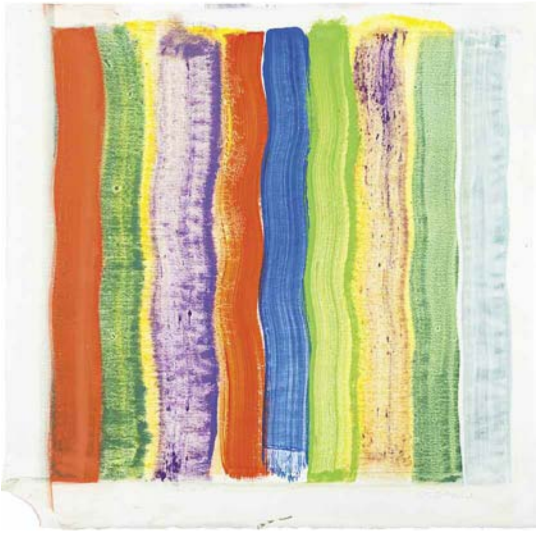
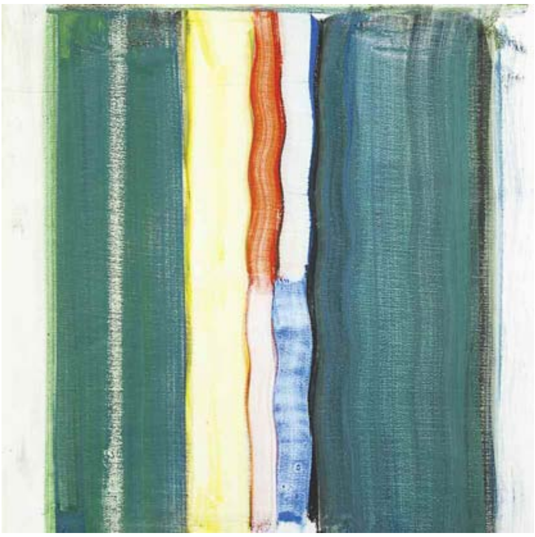
When the Victorian Walter Pater said that "all art constantly aspires to the condition of music," he was taking it for granted that music is the most abstract of all the arts. In music, form is content and content is form. This is a modern assumption nearly all of us make, having set aside such imitative effects as flute passages that mimic birdsong. We do not think of a violin concerto as representational. Aristotle would have disagreed, however, for he did not believe that the form and content of music are identical. As he heard it, musical form refers to something beyond itself. Consequently, to listen to music is to be carried along on a current of mimetic energy. For music represents the emotions and, more than that, character, which means that it can affect the listener for better or for worse.

Aristotle's idea of music is far from obsolete. I detect it lurking just beneath the surface of our modern notion that musical form is non-referential. Furthermore, I find it easy to transpose this ancient idea to Osborne's new paintings. We can call them abstract or, in some instances, quasi-figurative, but that labeling is beside the point of our experience of these works, which are joyous and witty and sometimes tinged with a sense of the passage of time.

Though her imagery seems at first glance to have flowed spontaneously onto the canvas, further looking often reveals signs of extensive revision. As the artist says, these barely perceptible ghosts of earlier configurations "give a painting a history." Thus the all-encompassing *now* of Osborne's imagery acquires temporal resonance. Possessed of a past, they have a future, which concerns us and brings me to the most powerful thing these paintings do. Like pieces of music, they change our moods. And as with all fully achieved works of art, they can have an effect not just on our moods but also on our characters. They can change us, subtly and for the better, if we will take the time to let them do so.

This essay benefitted greatly from conversations between artist and author held in July 2013. Walter Pater's remark about art and music appears in "The School of Giorgione" (1877), *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text,* ed. Donald L. Hill, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980, p. 106. Aristotle's comments on music appear in *The Politics and The Constitution of Athens,* ed. Stephen Everson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 199–207.





6 **Wave Series,** 2013
oil on paper, 13 ¼ x 13 ½ inches

7 **Wave Series II,** 2013
oil on paper, 12 ⅛ x 12 ¼ inches