

# ART SPIEL

Fine Arts Blog

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## Tamar Zinn – Field and Geometry

Throughout her drawings and paintings [Tamar Zinn](#) has developed her own visual vocabulary, rooted in abstraction. Zinn shares with Art Spiel her growth as an artist, work process, and current art and curatorial projects.



Tamar Zinn, *Pavane 21*, 2017  
pigmented charcoal and conté crayon on paper, 17 x 9”.

**AS: You say in your interview with Ann Landi (Vasari 21, Oct 30th 2017) that you started taking art classes at the Art Students League in your early teens. What can you briefly tell me about your art journey from there?**

**Tamar Zinn:** I think it is useful to go back even earlier than my teens, because experiences that started when I was very young continue to shape my work. Although I have no recollection of having asked to do any of this, by the time I was 5 or 6 years old I was taking classes in modern dance and violin lessons, both at the Henry Street Settlement on Manhattan’s lower east side. A few years after that, I started art classes at the Educational Alliance, and by the time I was in junior high school, I attended Saturday art classes at the Art Student’s League.

At the League, we were expected to draw from a still life (which I found quite dull), but I soon discovered there was a more appealing option – drawing from nude models. So at the age of 12, I started filling sketchbooks with charcoal drawings of headless bodies (I had absolutely no idea how to tackle faces, so I just left them out!) My favorite thing was to sketch the very short poses, since the objective was to capture the orientation of the body in space, rather than creating a carefully rendered image. I think that is when I started to find my line. Since I attended a high school that emphasized science and math (and offered very few art classes), my art making was limited to drawing from the model a few hours a month. Most of my ‘art time’ in those years was spent at NYC museums. I was busy looking, in a way I would now describe as slow looking.

I certainly wasn't on a career path to become a visual artist. To the extent that I spent any time thinking about what I might do long term, it seemed far more likely I'd be an art historian, an anthropologist, or even a research biologist. Nonetheless, since I saw college as a time to study what I enjoyed, rather than make career decisions, I started out with a double major – music performance and studio art.



Tamar Zinn, *At the still point 5*, 2015  
oil on dibond, 26 x 16"

**AS: Does music play a role in your art / thinking process?**

**Tamar Zinn:** Yes. I can give you a few examples of how music has shaped my experiences in the studio. In 2009, I started a series that I called *Broadway*. While I was working within the vocabulary of geometric abstraction, for me these paintings were an expression of rhythmic patterns and dance (the series title refers to Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*). The influence of music and movement was also present in my 2013 solo exhibit, *Still / Dancing*. In those paintings I was deliberately balancing areas of intense rhythmic activity with areas of quiet.

A more recent example of music permeating my work is in my drawings, specifically the *Pavane* series, which was just exhibited at the Garrison Art Center (a pavane is a slow processional dance from 16th-century Europe). In these drawings two lines interact with one other as they move through a field. Although the *Pavane* drawings are not an interpretation of a specific piece of music, I had been listening rather obsessively to a recording of Handel piano suites in the months leading up to making those drawings. So the dance of the two lines of music as they intertwined, moved apart, and at times merged into one, hovered over me in the studio.

Music is important to my process as a visual artist, but so is dance and movement. Music, dance, and visual art have always been woven together in my experiences – whether I'm in the audience or I'm the performer. When I listen to music, I also see movement in space. When I look at visual art, I often see harmonic relationships and rhythmic patterns that I associate with music and dance. When I draw, I generally begin by making gestures in the air before I make marks on paper.

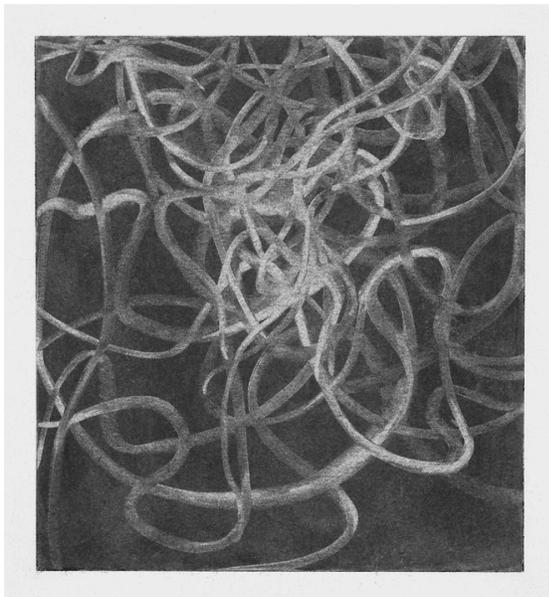
**AS: Let's take a look at your drawings. They all seem to derive from exploration of lines in space. Can you elaborate on that?**

**Tamar Zinn:** I draw because I want to see where my lines will take me. And where the lines take me is at least in part driven by my process, since I don't start with an idea of what I hope to explore. I only know that drawing is most satisfying for me when it is about the line, rather than about making marks to describe something.

Line and field are equally important to me. To find the direction for a new series of drawings, I start by doing many quick sketches, somewhat akin to short poses from the model. I keep going, waiting for something to grab my attention and announce: "This is it. There's something here." Only at that point do I begin to see where these lines are heading – some hug the edges of the field, while others move through it; some travel alone through an open field, while others move in tightly entwined clusters. It's a relief when I decide on the direction for the lines, but before I can move from sketches to drawings, there is the field to grapple with.

I consider the field like a stage set – it establishes the tone and boundaries for the drawing. The field for each series of drawings is unique to that series. Occasionally, establishing the field is as simple as isolating an area of the paper with a thin pencil line but most often, making the field is a slow and deliberate process. I may build a dense, dark charcoal field into which I draw with a kneaded eraser or I might work with pigmented charcoal to create a pale atmospheric field and then draw lines with Conté crayon. There is also a series where a graphite line is embedded between layers of oil pastel.

These drawings originate in the process, and perhaps they are my most direct expression of how I experience the intersection of movement, music, and visual art.



Tamar Zinn, *Tangle 34*, 2014  
charcoal on paper, 11 x 9"

**AS: You define yourself as an "abstract artist." That is a loaded concept in modern art. What does it mean to you and how do you see your work in that historical context?**

**Tamar Zinn:** I am rather ambivalent about using that term and end up hemming and hawing over what it means. Describing myself as an 'abstract artist' is really a shorthand convenience to communicate what I don't do – that my work isn't intended to be descriptive of a person, place, or thing. But of course, that label has to be unpacked to become meaningful. In my one-minute elevator pitch, what I add is that I

work within the context of abstraction, that my visual vocabulary is rooted in color and composition, and that the content of my work is the emotional sensations that are evoked by color and composition. I'd much prefer to show images than describe what I do by using words.

As for historical context, I'll simply offer that I have deep affection for the paintings of Malevich, Mondrian, Martin, Diebenkorn, Marden, and Scully. And I have absorbed potent lessons about color and composition by studying the still life and landscape paintings of Morandi, whose work I revere above all others.

**AS: In your *Moonglow* paintings as well as *At the still point*, you seem to reference landscapes. What's your take on that?**

**Tamar Zinn:** Yes, these paintings do reference the natural world although they aren't in any way depictions of nature. *At the still point* (2015-2017) marked a re-emergence of my preoccupation with light and atmosphere, and *Moonglow* (2017 – ongoing) began as a response to a lunar eclipse. You might say that my experiences of the natural world have been distilled into those paintings. Does that make them abstractions from nature or just abstraction?

To put these recent series in context, I think it would be helpful to share that for about 25 years, the focus of my work was invented landscape. Although my palette was never naturalistic, the forms were evocative of landscape. In 2002, when I began my dive into abstraction with the *Scrim* series, light was noticeably present in my work and that continued with the *Window* series (2005-2006). Then I gradually began to remove references to the natural world by eliminating light and modifying my palette, because I felt that even indirect references to light were a distraction from the structure and surface of the paintings. You can see that in my *Broadway* (2008-2012) series, as well as the paintings of the *Blacks and Whites* (2014-2017) series – composition and surface were my priorities for an extended period.

But it wasn't really a surprise when atmosphere and luminosity showed up again. My need for light has often pulled me back from a more minimalist sensibility. I think that artists, and very likely people in other creative fields, have preoccupations that remain present in their work over time. What changes is how we express those long-held concerns.



Tamar Zinn, *Moonglow 2*, 2017, oil on panel, 14 x 45"



Tamar Zinn, *Moonglow 3*, 2017, oil on panel, 24 x 72" (quad).

**AS: You indicated that your compositions have become increasingly spare. Can you tell me more about that evolution?**

**Tamar Zinn:** I certainly wouldn't characterize my current work as spare, primarily because of the palette, but I have gone through periods when I simplified the composition and palette to slow down the experience of looking. You can see that in *Fermata Lunga* (2013-2014) and *Tracing Stillness* (2015). Perhaps more relevant is that I frequently struggle between paring the work down and making it more complex. My work continues to see-saw between a more minimalist tendency, and an embrace of a lush, perhaps more emotional expression.



Tamar Zinn, *Tracing Stillness 9*, 2015  
charcoal on paper, 11 x 9"

**AS: Tell me a bit about your process. Maybe you can give me an example from your recent work – how do you start a painting?**

**Tamar Zinn:** My painting process is that I stumble around for a while, sometimes a very long while, until the painting suggests where it wants to go. At the start, the paintings are all about the field, and the geometry is added fairly late in the process.

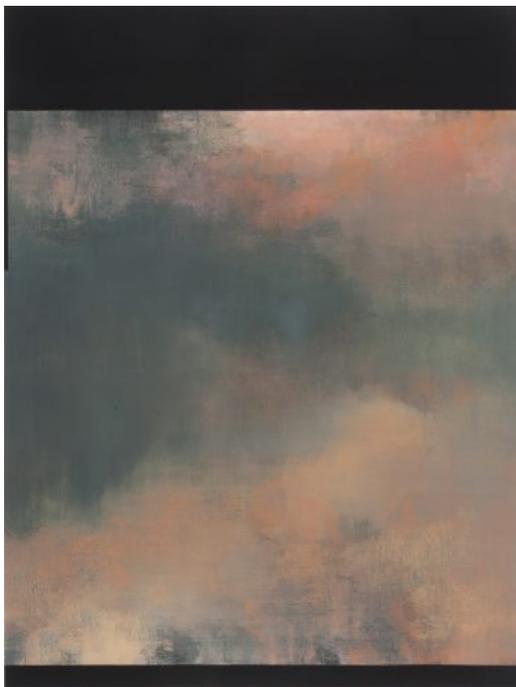
Here's an example of how a series begins. A couple of years ago, after an extended period of working with a palette limited to blacks and whites, I was eager to re-engage with color. While I continued with the compositional structures that I was already familiar with, I began to make paintings with very

saturated blues or reds, but they felt lifeless and dull despite the intense color. I realized that the palette of these paintings felt completely arbitrary. A few months later, I witnessed a lunar eclipse and was transfixed by the changing colors on the surface of the moon. My recollections and reinterpretations of the light reflected on the moon's surface became my pathway to color, and that was the start of the *Moonglow* series.

As for individual paintings, after creating a somewhat irregular textured surface by applying multiple layers of gesso, what follows is an extended period of stumbling. I apply many thin paint layers, each limited to a single color, brushed on in strokes perpendicular to the previous layer. I also use coarse sand paper (in perpendicular strokes) to reveal areas of previous paint layers. But I still have no idea of where I'm heading. At some point, a small area of the field will hold my attention and suggest a direction for the palette. Once I have established the dominant color relationships, I continue the process of layering and sanding the field.

However, without the geometry, the field holds little allure for me. It is only after the field is relatively well developed that I consider where I might place the geometric elements. More stumbling ensues as I move strips of black paper cut to different proportions around the edges of the painting. I keep experimenting with the paper strips until each geometric element tells me the precise proportion it needs to be. After that, the stumbling is finally over – I paint in the geometric elements and continue to adjust the field.

I know I'm done when the painting stops bothering me.



Tamar Zinn, *Behind Closed Eyes 11*, 2018  
oil on paper, 33 x 25"

**AS: What is going on in your studio these days?**

**Tamar Zinn:** That's a tough question for me to answer right now because I feel a strong pull in multiple directions and I don't have a large enough space to easily alternate between painting and drawing. I'm in the midst of several multi-panel paintings that build on the direction of *Moonglow* and *From Behind Closed Eyes* but with a palette that has become more intense.

I do really love seeing all that color when I walk into the studio after an extended dive into blacks and whites. But at the same time, I'd also like to start playing with larger scale, scroll-like drawings that incorporate more sweeping gestures. Or perhaps the lines will begin to show up in my paintings. Stay tuned.

**AS: You have recently curated a group show at Garrison Art Center. Can you tell me a bit about the origins of that show and your experience as a curator and participating artist?**

**Tamar Zinn:** The genesis of the exhibit at the Garrison Art Center, Explorations in Line, came from two directions. I was looking for opportunities to exhibit my drawings and I was also increasingly curious about how curators create conversations among the work of several artists. The two came together when I decided to curate a group exhibit that centered on my preoccupations with line. Since I didn't want a show that functioned as a broad survey about line, I decided to limit the number of artists to insure a meaningful dialog.

The work of several artists immediately came to mind, and I spent a serious amount of time looking and taking notes about their work. I was flooded with ideas about the commonalities as well as the many ways each artist's work was unique. Curating requires that you look slowly and that you remain open to surprises – noticing things you hadn't expected to find, particularly in your own work. But that is what makes it so satisfying. You can read more about my experience curating the show on my blog.



Tamar Zinn

*Photo by Harry Wilks*

<https://artspiel.org/tamar-zinn-field-and-geometry/>