

*On Jasmine Justice*  
—Jenni Wu

Expressionistic color combinations, frenetic lines and charmingly idiosyncratic shapes characterize the abstract paintings of Jasmine Justice. The paintings, themselves, are roughly square-shaped and rarely more than four feet in width. Their surfaces are richly textured—here, flat and opaque, there, raised and gleaming—an effect Justice achieves through her uninhibited mixture of acrylic, oil and vinyl-based paint. Crowding the walls of the living-room-cum-studio of her apartment in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, the paintings jostle for attention, each one daring the viewer to puzzle out its secret narratives. Despite the high Modernist tradition of seeing non-figurative paintings as impersonal studies on color and form, Justice believes that it is human nature to seek narrative in abstraction. Art, in the end, can never transcend its human origins, and paintings can never be just surfaces.

Seldom preplanned or presketched, each of Justice's paintings begins with an emotional impulse, often in response to an individual color. The physical process of adding other colors to the canvas helps her crystallize the initial sentiment into a thought, which she then expands into a complete narrative. Unsurprisingly, she sees her art as a way to better understand her own mind, and oftentimes, painting helps her to envision a better world. For example, in *Savior (Isis Painting)* (acrylic and oil on canvas), she contemplates the possibility of a future ruled by female deities. The painting adheres to the "cheap, flashy aesthetic" of one of Justice's favorite childhood television shows, *Isis*, in which an ancient amulet imbues a young science teacher with supernatural powers. On the canvas's otherwise sparse surface, two columns of silver triangles slide down technicolored bands, separated and framed by four smudged brown lines. For Justice, the painting depicts "a utopia where Isis has come back to the world to save us." Not wanting to put all of her trust in the TV goddess, Justice added the brown rope elements as "an alternate escape route just in case Isis doesn't really make it."

Favoring the spontaneous and organic over meticulous technical virtuosity, Justice deliberately creates lopsided shapes and irregular patterns. It's important, she insists, for works to "look like they were made by my hand." As follows, her paintings work like clues that reveal pieces of personal history. Growing up in a musical family in Spokane, Washington, she was exposed to punk bands from the local scene, as well as touring acts from the larger concert hub in Seattle. Justice's interest in patterns and geometric abstractions stemmed both from her grandmother's quilts and from artifacts on display at the nearby Museum of Native American Cultures. With no likeminded artists in her immediate peer group, Justice drew heavily on the ideas of historical figures like the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian and the German-born American sculptor Eva Hesse, creating her earliest work as a response to theirs.

Now, Justice uses the evocative term "channeling" to describe the imagined, inner conversations she maintains with other such artists. Her influences range from women famous for their independent spirits (Louise Bourgeois, Frida Kahlo), to contemporary abstract painters (Mary Heilmann, Monique Prieto). *Giants*, a medium-size square-shaped painting done in an ice-cream-counter palette of delicious pastels, is an overt homage to Agnes Martin, the Canadian-American artist famous for her ethereal, understated swaths of color and unwavering pencil lines. Like many of Martin's grid works, *Giants* exudes a feeling of joy, albeit in a louder, brasher register than Martin ever employed. "I was interested in making a painting of joy and feeling that all over your body," Justice said of her initial impulse. The resulting painting shows a large, sea-foam green circle floating against a uniform base of white. Like an oversized jawbreaker candy, the surface is sprinkled in a random pattern of pink, yellow, and blue dots. "It was a monotonous process, but it was exciting to put each dot down," Justice said, likening the activity to Martin covering a canvas in her delicate, hand-drawn lines. Here, it is obvious that Justice's

“channeling” does not mean “copying” or even pure imitation. Rather than adopt Martin’s lucid, methodical style, she paints as if Martin’s mind were inhabiting her body. As if the deceased artist’s spirit were using a new physical vessel to explore a familiar cognitive process.

The pioneering color field painter, Barnett Newman, gets a more irreverent treatment. In *Fancy* (Flashe, acrylic and oil on canvas), a melodramatic background of black splotches and brown, white and neon scrawls threaten to overwhelm two bands of thin, vertical lines (“zips” in Newman’s parlance). “I was thinking about Victorian wallpaper,” Justice said, “And of a humorous juxtaposition of Newman-esque bands with dangerous female wallpaper.” Like the dots in *Giants*, the splotches and scrawls in *Fancy* do not repeat in an orderly manner. Rather than actual wallpaper patterns, they seem to resemble cartoon explosions or the voracious mouths of overlapping monsters. Justice jokingly calls them “decorated holes.” For her, painting *Fancy* was like writing a fictional war story. In the place of human characters, she anthropomorphizes elements of the painting, pitting the “zips” against the “holes” in a battle for the viewer’s attention. The foreground “zips” squeeze the “holes” into the background, trying to keep them away from the viewer’s eye. And yet, the translucent color of the “zips” implies their collective weakness, suggesting that, in time, the world of whorls and hungry swirls may devour them.

Of course, Justice doesn’t expect viewers to decipher this—or any of the stories she’s embedded in her paintings, and remains open to alternative interpretations of her work. In this spirit, one may read her vibrant abstractions as chapters in the story of a young artist grappling with her relationship to the art-historical canon, addressing her childhood influences, and creating an ongoing dialogue between herself and her artistic predecessors.

---

The writer, **Jenni Wu**, is currently finishing her M.S. degree at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, where she wrote her master's project on the relationship between art criticism and the contemporary art market. A native Iowan, she has a B.A. in Art History and French from Grinnell College. There she co-chaired the Art History department's Student Educational Policy Committee and helped organize the 2003 student salon exhibition. She lives in Manhattan.

The mentor, **Carey Lovelace**, is a New York based journalist and playwright. She has written for publications including *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *Newsday*, *Harper's*, *Artforum*, the *International Herald Tribune* and *artnet.com*. She just completed a term, 2003-2006, as co-president of the U.S. chapter of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA/USA). She is currently working on a book, *An Army of Lovers Cannot Fail: A Passionate History of the Women's Movement in Art, 1968-2006*; vol. 1, “Dancing at the Revolution: The 1970s.” She is also an award-winning playwright, with productions at the New York-based Ensemble Studio Theater, the Samuel French One-Act Festival and REDCAT Theater in Los Angeles, among other locales.