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Patricia Treib: Sinuations

By Louis Block



Patricia Treib, *Le Cinture*, 2025. Oil on canvas, 72 × 108 inches. Courtesy Bureau, New York.

The shapes in Patricia Treib's canvases are painted with a vernal insistence, like shoots and petals still torquing into their final forms. For her current show, the artist reprises familiar motifs: garment patterns, an ornate clock, the area between a torso and an arm; base images that act less as repeated subjects and more as liquid armatures for Treib's brush. That brush —alternately lush and pencil-thin—responds to previous variations on the root shape rather than describing the initial observed object, so the memory involved in painting successive canvases is as muscular as it is visual. Treib has described an "accumulation of rehearsals" in the studio, and it would be easy to imagine the motions in each painting from a choreographer's perspective, the brush's pivots and flourishes blocked out beforehand. That the canvases are painted flat reinforces a topological understanding of Treib's shapes; how they are made is more vital than how they appear.

The paintings all begin as small oil studies on paper, a number of which are on view in the gallery. It is possible to compare the broad differences in scale between working at seven inches and seven feet while also tracing continuities in the process of building particular shapes: right turn, long streak, reverse, curve, etc. One shape appears more than any other in the show: it wobbles and skews from painting to painting, more or less a multi-lobed pendant with a fruiting appendage to its right. It can be floral or elephantine, its

edges sometimes winnowed into sharp nibs. It might be the most calligraphic of Treib's shapes as it reads left to right and doubles in uncharacteristic horizontal canvases, advancing like musical notation. The shape is relatively unmoored from its ground, seeming to float in most compositions. Its original motif is of clipped garment patterns against a studio wall crossed by the spindly branches of a cactus. That airy nature of the chance composition—of happenstance pairings in the studio—has survived its countless abstractions just as the other motifs, increasingly morphed by shifts of color and scale, have retained their own unique characters. Paintings derived from a motif of a decorative clock, for example, seem almost architectural in their order compared to the "sleeve" paintings; and, in a more telling juxtaposition, the paintings derived from the arm of a Greek icon are more solid, tightly cropped affairs. Take the twin blues of two paintings from this year, Sheer Sleeve and Benaki Icon, the former swelling and uncertain, the latter gelid; it is no coincidence that one evolved out of a cutout template and another from a devotional panel. Looking at these canvases is all about degrees of removal.

Antiparian (2025), a leafy, ideogrammatic blue against a brown field of ornaments, is part of a group that Treib has been working on for over a decade, departing from an initial still life of three film cameras. While it was fairly easy to locate the contours of a camera's lens, strap, and case in previous iterations, this version has no such links—there are only certain flourishes and tendencies of the arm that give away its origins. As Treib repeated and honed those movements over years, the edges between shapes began to take precedence over the shapes themselves, so the current painting is a mongrel, each tendril curving inward to insist on itself as an entity. The game of uncovering Treib's individual references, however, is less important than the gymnastic quality that the motifs lend the paintings, which reinforces the body's role in image making, whether through actual depictions of sleeves, shoulders, and elbows or via metaphor (the turning "hands" of a clock, the way a camera "sees").

Many of Treib's titles reference the ornamental volutes of Ionic architecture, but beyond any art historical discussion of structure versus decoration, "volute" contains a key to the paintings: it describes a spiral, derived from the Latin verb volvere for twist, roll. Each shape in these paintings owes its formation to the action of certain joints—wrist, elbow, shoulder—with limits that are perfectly round, and to other spiraling forms: the hands of a clock, the aperture of an eye or a camera. They are ideas that are turned around in one's head, painted in nocturnal and diurnal variations, in one day and over years. If style in painting is how one brush deals uniquely with a subject, then Treib has made a subject out of style. Her deeply saturated swathes of color reveal a musculature that continually feeds off of its own beginnings.

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