

East City Art Reviews: *Always Into Now* at the Torpedo Factory



By [Eric Hope](#) on April 28, 2016



Always Into Now (partial view)

Artist Lisa Kellner is at work in the background.

Photo for East City Art by Eric Hope.

When is a painting not just a painting? When its composite colors dance before your very eyes, its shapes bend and twist as the result of your presence and its idiosyncrasies gently reveal themselves to you on currents of air. For artist Lisa Kellner, painting truly comes alive when canvas is removed from the equation. Her first solo exhibition in the DC area, *Always Into Now*, is currently on view at the Torpedo Factory's Target Gallery in Alexandria and invites viewers to experience the modality of painting in an immersive, experiential manner. Prior to the exhibition's opening the artist spent several days on-site "painting" in the gallery, which gave me the chance to learn more about her artistic process and approach to creating her work.

This idea of "painting in space"—the notion that painted imagery can be experienced in three dimensions—at first feels counterintuitive; history tells us paintings are supposed to hang unmoving on a wall, their secrets revealed by the viewer's gaze. Yet one of the most striking facets of our current, contemporary ethos is the eagerness of artists to upend everything we thought we knew, challenging viewers to develop their critical eyes in new ways. While occasionally unsettling, the rewards are worth the risk as we encounter works that disrupt our preconceived notions of how art should function.

Kellner's disruptive process begins the moment we cross the gallery threshold. The walls themselves, awash in geographic planes of deep, inky blue, envelop the senses as they simultaneously become canvas primer for the meat of the work. Suspended in air throughout the gallery are ethereal forms of hazy whites, interspersed by jabs of cerulean and forest greens. Puffs of white and blue rest lightly on the floor, their shapes perhaps slightly too heavy to resist the subtle pull of gravity. Harsh squares situated at various points on the floor (mimicked by white incisions along the walls) stand in counterpoint to the whiffs of color that dance around them. Visitors might be tempted to literally lay on the gallery floor, gazing up as one does at passing clouds.



Always Into Now (partial view)

Lisa Kellner

Photo for East City Art by Eric Hope.

Notions of lounging aside, the work fully comes alive as you move around, inside and through the forms. The overall effect of the work, with its surface randomness that almost suggests effortlessness, belies the artist's planning and preparation. Kellner shapes her forms with translucent silks, allowing one's gaze to visualize the forms less as volumes and more as hazy impressions of hue and tone. A secondary benefit to silk as a medium is its ability to hold shape without visible molds or firming agents, which would negate its translucent qualities. Kellner hand-colors her silks with a variety of liquid dyes, including acrylics, silk screen inks and even tea to achieve her desired tones. That these design details fade into the ether as you walk around, beside and under the shapes is just as the artist intends.

What rises to the surface (no pun intended) in a more immediate way is a feeling of being submerged in something akin to an aquatic landscape. According to the artist, that is not an entirely off base, in that she notes she is influenced by shapes found in

urban and natural environments. Similar to the work itself, Kellner resides in two parallel worlds, dividing her time between the chaos of New York City and a small cabin in rural, upstate Maine. In this particular work, those natural shapes and impulses tend to visually dominate (they are numerous and at eye level), but hints of architecture certainly abound. These nods to urbanity, represented by those squared forms and incisive lines on the wall, pack an outsized punch despite being overwhelmed numerically by the more gentle shapes. Indeed, the most dynamic moments of the work occur when these forms intersect to create visual tension between rigidity and flowing ease.

During our conversation, Kellner focuses on this concept of *painting in space* and notes she considers herself a painter “that works in a spiral”—not a sculptor. Further, the artist is adamant that her work is not an installation, but a painting that lives in space, if only for a moment (after the exhibition, the materials will be recycled into other works). When Kellner stands back and scans the space, she sees suggestions of color floating in midair rather than physical components of a sculptural installation. In this vein of thinking, the monofilament lines used to hang the silks are akin to deft brushstrokes and seams within the fabric can denote natural color variations we often see on a canvas. It is as if an abstract painting has come to life.



Always Into Now (partial view)

Lisa Kellner

Photo courtesy of the Torpedo Factory Art Center.

This distinction between installation and painting is difficult to grasp, considering the work technically is *installed* within the gallery space. The gallery's online exhibition notes even describe it as an installation. Yet when we consider other contemporary works with similar materials and visual forms key differences do arise. Kellner's work is in some ways reminiscent of the early installation works of her fellow American artist Senga Nengudi or more currently the Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto, both of whom use fairly opaque materials such as pantyhose and mesh to create three-dimensional, biomorphic forms which often hang in midair. Distinctively, in those installations the forms are given visual (and often literal) weight, inhabiting the gallery and commanding our attention. The visual intent is to focus our view onto the sculptural qualities of the shapes themselves; in effect we see sculpture whose forms are influenced in opposition to the structure of the space they inhabit. Kellner's work features little of that antagonistic quality between structure and form. Further, the ethereal nature of the work, where one's eyes focus on hazy color rather than semi-solid forms, lends a certain credence to her concept of painting in space.

As I think about the piece several days later, my mind remembers impressions of color rather than distinctive shapes. Forms meld together, devolving from three dimensions back into two, and pure abstraction comes to the fore. It is as if the artist teased the pigment off a canvas, artfully stretching it in midair for a brief moment in time before it snaps back into place. Color as the sole remnant of memory would likely please Kellner, as in the end this is the very definition of a painting, making Kellner the latest, modern embodiment of a painter.