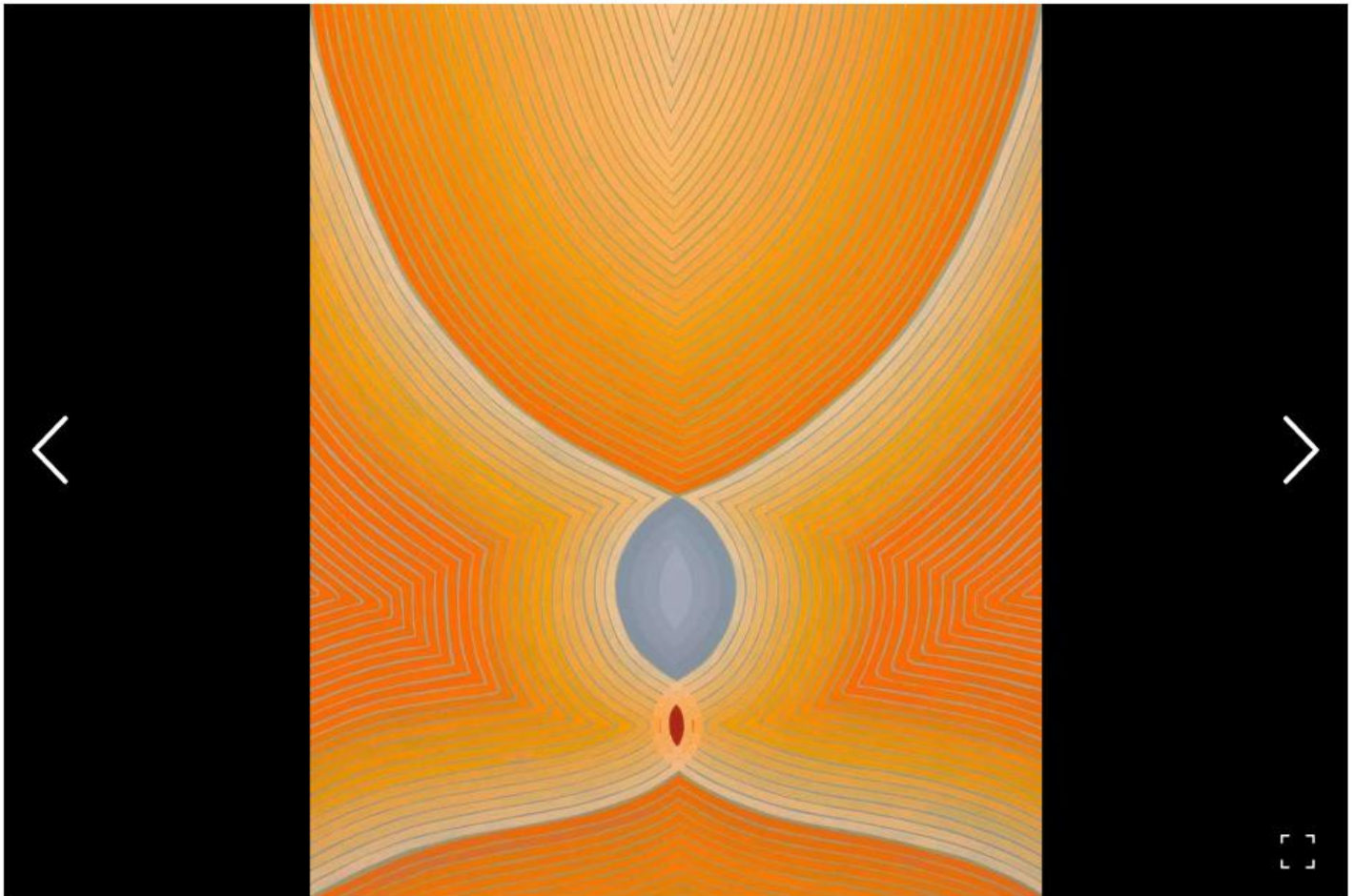




Vibrant 'Slow Grow' exhibit at Union College

Organic forms made colorful in Jenny Kemp's work

Amy Griffin | Oct. 17, 2018 | Updated: Oct. 17, 2018 6 p.m.



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?Crossover? acrylic on linen over canvas, 18 x 22 inches, 2017 Jenny Kemp

Jenny Kemp is a painter first, animator second. But Julie Lohnes, the Mandeville Gallery's curator of art collections and exhibitions, told me she first encountered Jenny Kemp's animations before seeing her

paintings. Kemp began experimenting with animation while in the University of Albany's MFA program (she graduated in 2012). It wasn't until Lohnes saw Kemp's drawings and paintings in person that she fully recognized their power; as she pointed out, "they tend to suffer online." It's true, digital reproductions can't replicate the experience of standing in front of the works in her solo exhibition, "Slow Grow," at Mandeville Gallery. While the work is as attractive and appealing in reproductions, the humanity can get lost—what might seem almost too perfect in a photograph reveals its charming imperfections in person. The obsessive (or maybe "meditative" is a better term), nature of her practice becomes evident: the layers of paint, the evidence of the artist's hand in the slight unevenness of the concentric lines. Even the space she creates becomes deeper and the perspective shifts in front of your eyes.

In "Bug's Ear," from 2017, her signature color-shifting concentric lines ring a group of broad solid lines in gradations of greens around a golden capsule shape in the center. Shades of bright orange both pop and recede in the corners, pushing the central shape out even as your eye is drawn down into the center of the painting. The painting practically breathes, but that's a recurring sensation with this show.

In all of her works here, Kemp balances repeated lines with areas of solid color—a place to let your eyes rest, as if she knows she's giving us a lot of information at once. Those solid sections also serve to ground the compositions as the lines converge around them, creating their own distinct forms.

Kemp has long concerned herself with biology and organic forms. She told me in a 2014 interview that "mostly what I like my work to reference is the body." That is truer now than ever. Both the show's title and the brochure text refer to "growth" and the text is sprinkled with words like "reproduction," "change," "fertile," and "fruitful." The paintings, like many abstract works, can function like Rorschach tests, with each viewer seeing something different, but these hints affirmed my own feeling that some of these works are very much about the power and potential of the female body. "Dream Team" (2016) and "Cross Over" (2017) feel almost like fertility goddesses rendered in the abstract. "Rush" (2017) exudes a kind of sexual power.

The Nott Memorial can be a challenging space for an artist with its powerful architecture and deep red walls, yet Kemp's works hold their own and sit compatibly in conversation with the space. Lohnes notes in the brochure the congruency of the historical nickname of the dome: "The Nipple of Knowledge."

These concepts are subtext—her formal concerns remain text: close attention to color relationships, contrasting line and shape with gradated and solid colors that create forms in a space that is constantly shifting, pulsating.

Kemp works these concerns into her animations, set aside in a small viewing room in the gallery. Solid-colored shapes travel across the screen and crash into each other where they break open to reveal concentric lines underneath before fading out. The effect is transfixing, and the lines have a more dizzying effect than they do in the paintings. Animated, they appear to multiply and move, while in the paintings, they quiver but, because of her use of color, they never overwhelm in an overtly op-art way. The animations are fun, but they don't match the power of the physical paintings, which dominate the show and rightly so; they richly reward the viewer who takes the time to view them in person.

Amy Griffin is a contributor to the Times Union.