

This is an exhibition of new and existing work by Léonie Guyer.  
It's called *form in the realm of*.



## First, a suggestion.

To accompany your reading of this essay, I recommend putting on Terry Riley's famous track *In C* (1964). My favorite version is the one recorded by Bang on a Can in 2001, but there are many others. The composition features 53 different short musical phrases, each of which is in the chord of C, and so even when performers play them out of sync, they are all in tune. Each fragment is made of tiny notes that move over, under, and within each other. It's a *vast* kind of minimalism—a contradiction.

Léonie Guyer makes paintings and drawings. They consist mostly of abstract shapes, usually modest in scale, made with oil paint or pencil. In her mind, an artwork is a place where countless decisions are condensed and compacted together, and she works to intensify that concentration by keeping her paintings small and reduced down to their bare essentials: color, surface, and shape. She tries to do the most with the least.

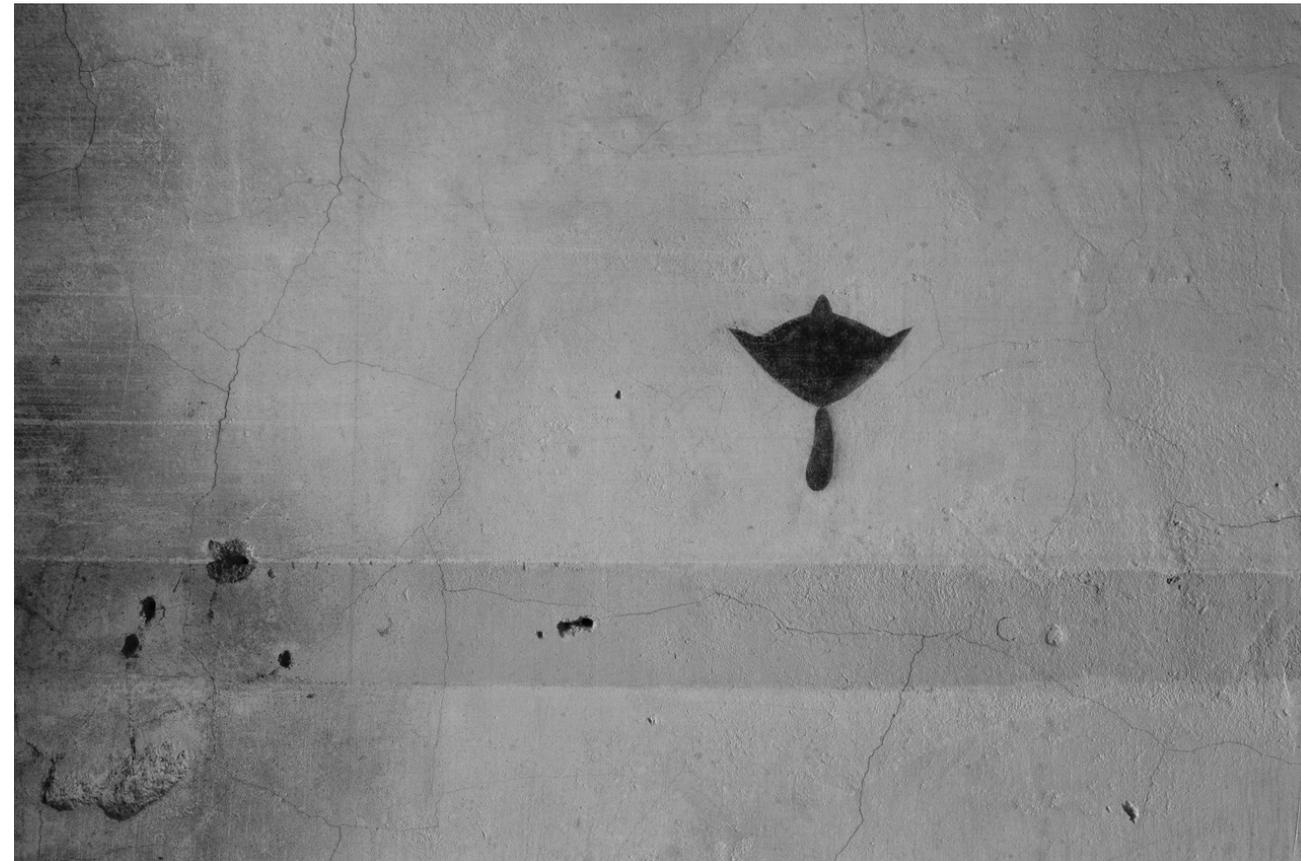
And yet to call her works “small” is misleading. Better would be to say that she makes “immeasurable” works of art, which doesn't mean that they are epic in scale but simply that they are not meant to be measured.

Guyer is drawn to the moment that precedes language, and her work locates a space that we can't yet recognize or describe. She is after something that is at the edge of visibility: pre-language, pre-shape, pre-geometry, perhaps even pre-existing.

But while Guyer seeks out the *pre-*, she doesn't consider abstraction to be something that happens *before* representation, but that it is always already there. Just as Buddhist thought describes reality as a boundless flow that exists beyond visual appearance but that is attainable as a felt experience, Guyer's abstract shapes are concentrated manifestations of 100,000 years of painting unfolding right now, in the present moment.

Put another way, in the words of the master Japanese potter Shoji Hamada, "good pots are born, not made." *In The Life of Forms* (1934), the art historian Henri Focillon, a favorite reference of Guyer's, argues that forms are not born of a cognitive act but are discovered, always already there—over, under, and within each other.

Léonie Guyer, *Gift*, 2006, gouache on walls; installation view, Shaker Museum | Mount Lebanon, New York



Guyer has developed a repertoire of invented shapes—she calls them “reincarnations”—that are altered, bent, and endlessly readjusted. But first things first: before getting to the shape, she chooses a surface and begins mixing pigment and oil to make her paint.

For a painter, a surface is not just an object but is an architecture, and each surface presents a distinct set of problems, and prompts a distinct set of decisions about how to inhabit it. Guyer moves her consistent vocabulary of forms across a varied landscape of surfaces: there is the rectangular wooden board, a common support for a painting, on which she slowly builds up a foundation before articulating the edge of a shape. There is the marble fragment—with its broken rough edge and its clean manufactured ones—which creates an association to ancient archeological sites on the one hand, and to readymade interior decoration on the other, and establishes a proximity and a simultaneity between a contemporary experience and one that is thousands of years old. Guyer also uses thin pieces of aged paper she buys from a few suppliers who carry sheets that can sometimes be several hundred years old. The paper’s fragility, combined with the fact that it has survived for so long, gives the drawing an almost

impossible or miraculous resilience, as if its tiny shape could withstand (and/or contain) the most severe outbursts of emotions. Finally, there is the surface of the wall itself: Guyer paints small shapes in different areas within a room or a building. In this case, the paintings hover between discreet marks or traces and miniature frescoes that could potentially remain in place, hiding in plain sight, for decades or centuries.

Guyer then starts making the countless small decisions involved in knowing just how to inhabit these surfaces with painted or drawn shapes. At the same time, she is equally invested in the surfaces that are to remain unpainted—the expanses of negative space on the paper, board, marble, or wall that are left blank but are still very much an active part of the architecture of her work.

They, too, are in C.

Léonie Guyer, *Untitled, no. 100*, 2018, oil on marble; Photo: Phillip Maisel



Then comes the shape. A simple dot or a line will not do. “It wouldn’t be idiosyncratic enough,” she says.

She applies multiple thin layers of paint, many of which are wiped away, until they coalesce into a unified whole. The forms are nuanced and precise but also amorphous and even a bit awkward. They could be formal abstract compositions, but also a hieroglyphic form of language, an ancient or secret symbol, or a mark on a graphic score. In that sense, they are the opposite of ornament: they aim to make painting feel stranger, not more comfortable. We could call them beautiful, but only because they are imperfect.

In this exhibition, these shapes are placed side by side, on shelves and on the wall. Daylight moves across them, like another kind of paintbrush, adding depth and tone. Despite all of the emptiness that separates them, they form a single wavering dance, or maybe a sentence, or, reading between the lines, even some abstract form of prayer.

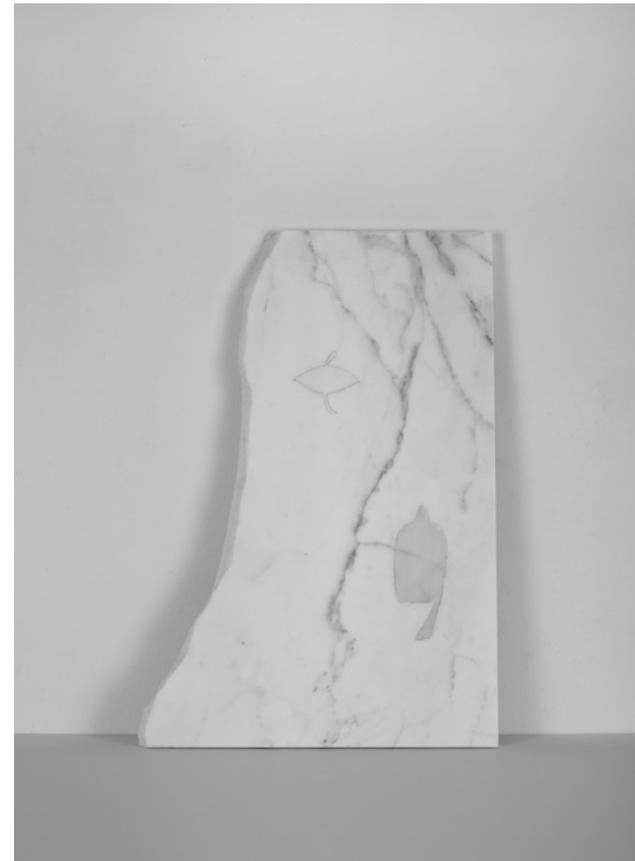
In describing what she meant by “deep listening,” the late minimalist (there’s that misleading word again) composer Pauline Oliveros noted the difference between hearing and listening: while the former is physiological, the latter involves an active subjectivity. Not only is it different for each of us, but it is a way to learn about that which we don’t already know. Listening, if given the proper attention and if embraced with the proper vulnerability, is a way the unfamiliar can become part of us. *Looking* and *seeing* have a similar relationship, and Guyer has placed a range of barely visible marks and lines on the walls for those who choose to see them.

Léonie Guyer, *Untitled, FR-49*, 2016, pencil on 19th c. French paper;  
Photo: Phillip Maisel



Guyer is not a musician, but describing her work with a musical vocabulary is effective because her paintings are made with so much more than paint. To define her shapes, she takes the contours of Cycladic figures (6500 - 1650 BCE) or the lines in Near and Middle Eastern prayer rugs (13th - 15th centuries) and cooks them down over time. She collects Indian tantric paintings and Roman unguentaria, visits museums to see ancient Japanese and Korean vessels, and relates them to the abstractions of Constantin Brancusi or James Lee Byars, despite the cultures and centuries that separate them. She borrows equally from the fragile yarn sculptures by Fred Sandback or Richard Tuttle's wire works as she does from Shaker tools and furniture pieces.

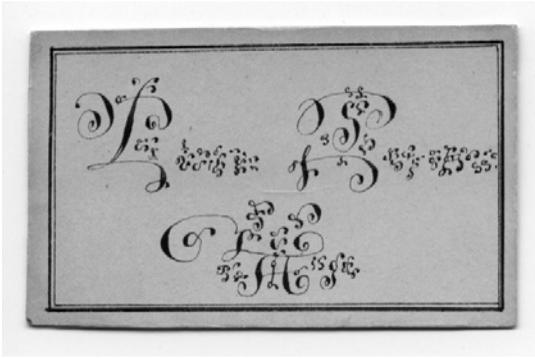
Léonie Guyer, *Untitled, no. 106*, 2018, oil on marble, Photo: Phillip Maisel



If painting lies at the center of this work, different paths lead up to it and emerge from it. By choosing to show some of these other elements alongside her own work, Guyer has brought this subtle maze of references into the exhibition itself.

Lodged somewhere inside her abstract and condensed language of wordless shapes are Susan Howe's poems made of shredded layers of word fragments. Guyer's lines live within the tender craftsmanship and engineering of an oval box made by Shakers in the 19th century, while Shaker "gift drawings," originally made as a way to share a message from God, could stand in for the ways the spiritual and the secretive—the *speaking-in-tongues*—runs through all of Guyer's work. And the basic and essential forces of gravity and motion that Terry Fox captures in his video *Children's Tapes* (1974), alongside the attentiveness necessary to experience them, are in play throughout the entire exhibition.

But let me get out of the way. Here is what the artist has to say about the objects she selected:



*Shaker gift drawings are very rare, made mostly by girls and women during a brief period in the 19th century. They are transcriptions of messages received in dreams from Mother Ann, dead saints, and friendly spirits. Delicate lines inscribe secret teachings that cannot be spoken but may be shared.*

Left: Card with Mother Ann Lee's name written in an unknown script. Collection of the Shaker Museum | Mount Lebanon, New York; Right: Unusually small and rare Shaker oval box, crafted at New Lebanon, NY, circa 1840; Maple sides, pine top and bottom, copper tacks; Collection of Ben and Toby Rose



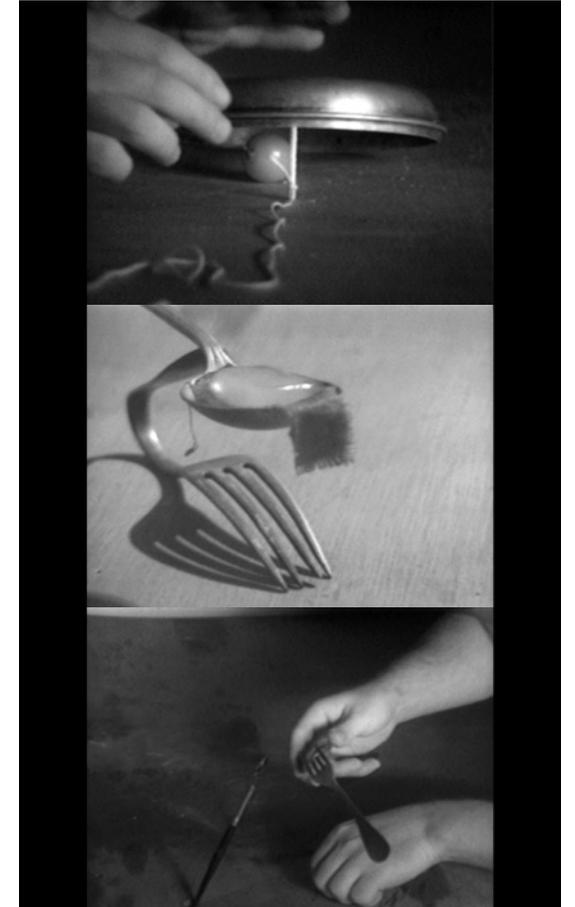
*This small oval box holds essential Shaker values—quality of attention, integrity, simplicity, harmony. In the Shaker world, action is prayer, work an offering.*

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*These minute glass vessels are about 2,000 years old. They may once have held oils, medicine, perfume, cosmetics, love potions, tears. Their awkward elegance and viridescence captivate.*

Left: Glass unguentaria from the Mediterranean region of the Roman Empire, circa 1st c. BCE. Collection of the artist; Right: Terry Fox, *Children's Tapes* (stills), 1974; Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York



*The "Children's Tapes," a series of actions performed for the artist's young son in which humble elemental objects are used to enact various transformations. Or in a word, magic.*

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Léonie Guyer, *Untitled, no. 85*, 2015–2016, oil and chalk gesso on wood panel,  
Photo: Phillip Maisel



**Our time on earth is fragile, temporary, and brief. Many work to fit as much into it as possible, sometimes with remarkable and even miraculous results, and other times with terrifying and catastrophic ones. But in a moment when attention and visibility is determined not by what you say but by how loudly you say it, it might also be possible to simply listen.**

**—Anthony Huberman**

*Léonie Guyer: form in the realm of* is on view at CCA Wattis Institute from October 18 to December 15, 2018.

Léonie Guyer (b. 1955, New York, NY) lives and works in San Francisco. Her work has been exhibited in galleries such as Feature Inc. and Peter Blum, in New York; Greg Kucera in Seattle; and 2nd Floor Projects and Triple Base Gallery in San Francisco, among others. Institutions and non-profit spaces such as the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; the Lumber Room and the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, both in Portland; as well as the Shaker Museum, in Mount Lebanon, NY, have also exhibited her work. Guyer has collaborated on book projects with poets Franck André Jamme and the late Bill Berkson. She has taught at the California College of the Arts, the San Francisco Art Institute, and the University of California at Berkeley, and currently teaches at San Jose State University. Guyer received a B.F.A. and an M.F.A. from the San Francisco Art Institute.

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Cover image: Léonie Guyer, *Untitled, mkk-8*, 2018, gouache and pencil on handmade Indian paper;  
Photo: Phillip Maisel

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