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Anoka Faruqee's Dance of Matter and Light

For an artist known for her flawless alignments (or deliberate misalignments) of overlapping wave patterns to achieve a memorable optical effect, the inclusion of “bruises” seems a bold and unexpected move.

By **John Yau**



Installation view of “Anoka Faruqee: Rainbows and Bruises” (2017), Koenig & Clinton, New York (all images courtesy the artist and Koenig & Clinton, New York. All photos by Jeffrey Sturges)

There is a strain of painting that originated with Georges Seurat, which focuses on the study of optics and various theories of color in an attempt to understand how we see the world. The Impressionists were interested in color and light, but none of them pursued the truth of that experience to the extent that Seurat did. This scientific strain includes the rigorous paintings of Josef Albers and his series *Homage to the Square*, which he began in 1950, when he was more than sixty years old. Other artists working in this domain include Alfred

Jensen, Bridget Riley, Sanford Wurmfeld, Robert Swain, Richard Anuszkiewicz, and the recently deceased Julian Stanczak.

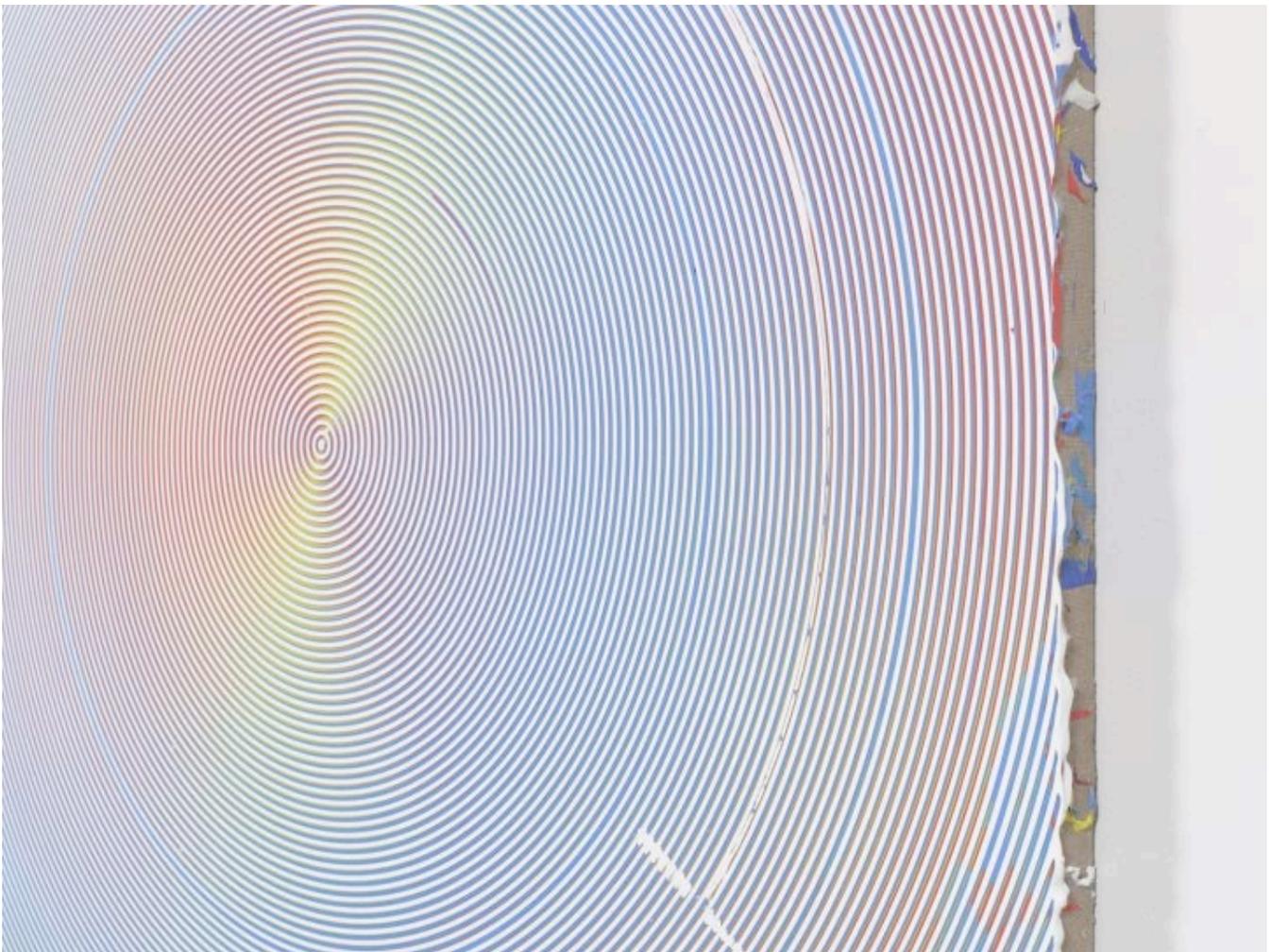
In her exhibition *Anoka Faruqee: Rainbows and Bruises* at Koenig & Clinton (February 23 – April 8, 2017), her second at this gallery, which will soon depart Manhattan and relocate in Brooklyn, the artist shows works from *Moiré*, *Circle*, and *Wave*, three ongoing series. The works in the *Circle* series, however, were the ones that kept pulling me back. Eventually, as much as I looked at the other paintings in the show, this group stood out, perhaps because it is new to me.



Anoka Faruqee, "2016P-02 (Circle)" (2016), acrylic on linen on panel, 45 x 45 inches

I have been following Faruqee's work since I first saw paintings from the *Moiré* series a few years ago, but until now I had never seen her superimpose white the tight, concentric circles that characterize this series. The use of white enables her to achieve a more ephemeral condition, in which the spectral light and colors change with each move you make in front of the painting. This happens in all of her work, of course, but now it is about the spectrum or what the artist calls "rainbows." I don't know if it's the symmetrical composition, ostensibly a circle within a square, or the use of white in addition to the red, blue, and green, or red, blue, and yellow as the dominant colors, or the obvious incorporation of accident into the process, but the *Circle* paintings seem to have moved her forward.

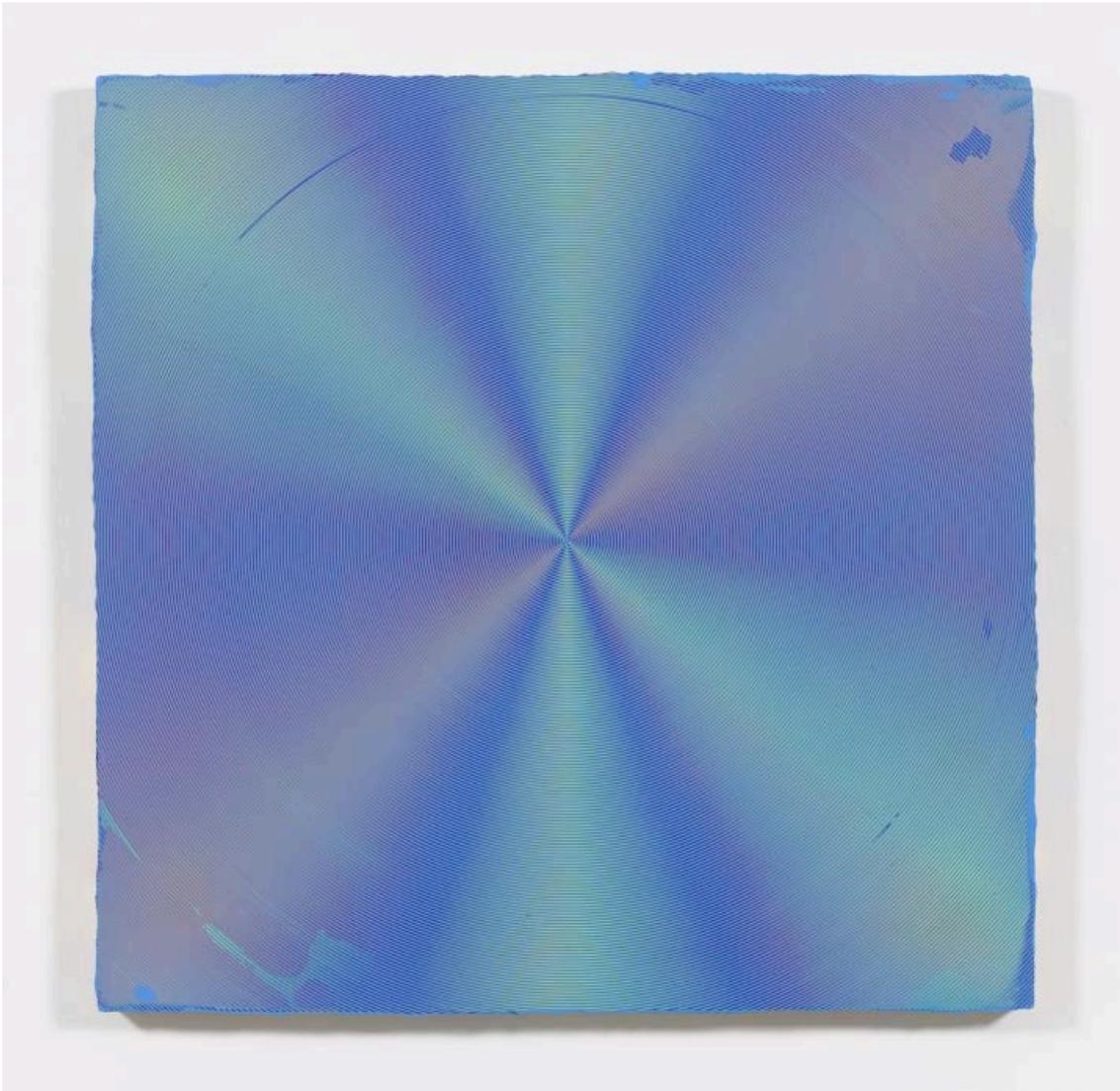
The process seems straightforward enough. The artist makes a number of ridged, evenly spaced, concentric lines on the painting's prepared surface with a custom-designed tool, which rotates around the canvas like a rake pulling its teeth through a thick coat of color. The registration of the concentric lines (red, blue, and green) is key to what happens optically. As part of this process, clumps of paint build up in spots and blot certain areas.



Anoka Faruqee, "2016P-02 (Circle)" (detail) (2016), acrylic on linen on panel, 45 x 45 inches

While the “bruises” in the exhibition’s title likely refer to misaligned patterns in fabrics, I also thought of them as the bodily counterpart to the optical domain defined by “rainbows.” Our experience of the painting runs from the spectral to the physical, and from changing light to grooved, corporeal surfaces and clots of paint, making this viewer at least highly conscious of the dance between eye and body, seeing and feeling. In this regard, Faruqee’s paintings stand apart from those of her predecessors, such as Josef Albers. In the *Circle* paintings, the changing spectral light coming from her use of three colors plus white evokes the digital world and printing combinations possible with the CMYK, RGB and other limited combinations. As in the world of color printing, the artist is able to generate more hues than she places on the canvas.

By incorporating areas in which the paint is not evenly distributed or a patch of white appears, Faruqee introduces a distinctly human element into a seemingly mechanical process. For an artist known for her flawless alignments (or deliberate misalignments) of overlapping wave patterns to achieve a memorable optical effect, the inclusion of “bruises” seems a bold and unexpected move.



Anoka Faruqee, “2017P-06 (Circle)” (2017), acrylic on linen on panel, 45 x 45 inches

The other, more powerful achievement is the range of optical effects that she is able to attain through her use of white in the *Circle* paintings. In these paintings, something happens no matter where you stand. When you are close-up, you see the ridged concentric lines and how much they overlap. Look long and hard enough, and you can detect the slight shifts that the concentric lines of one color make in relation those of another color. When you move to the other end of this long, rectangular gallery, and stand with your back to the opposite wall, your eyes begin mixing the colors, and you see yellow or violet, hues and spectral tones that she has not used. This means that Faruqee starts with muted hues — such as brownish-red — and ends up with pure spectral colors. The experience is perplexing and intriguing, scientific and magical.

Once you become conscious of this and other effects, you begin to grasp what Seurat must have been after: the way we absorb and mix distinct colors at the back of our eyes. The white patches where Faruqee's toothed instrument covers the ridged, concentric lines, combined with the thick paint spilling over the painting's edges, underscore the artist's penchant for meticulousness fused with her recognition that control is not always called for. In synthesizing these divergent approaches, she brings together the geometric and the gestural, the mechanical and the handmade. More importantly, she finds a way past the tight organization we associate with optical paintings informed by scientific research.



Installation view of "Anoka Faruqee: Rainbows and Bruises" (2017), Koenig & Clinton, New York

By opening up the geometric while maintaining a painstaking approach, Faruqee seems to have entered new, uncharted territory. While the *Moire* series recalls the history of weaving and decorative fabrics, the white *Circle* paintings evoke the digital age we have immersed ourselves in. The white patches and clots of paint remind us that at this stage of civilization's existence, matter cannot be easily overcome.

Anoka Faruqee: Rainbows and Bruises continues at Koenig & Clinton (459 West 19th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 8.

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