

ARTnews

Painter Cynthia Hawkins Makes Her Own Rules Through Her Abstractions



BY ALEX GREENBERGER

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Cynthia Hawkins in her studio in Poughkeepsie, New York, 2025.
PHOTO CHRISTOPHER GARCIA VALLE FOR ARTNEWS

Throughout recent art history, grids have remained a constant. Prized by artists for their rigid orderliness, they have been painted, sculpted, and woven. Many critics have claimed that the grid is emotionless. Art historian Rosalind Krauss **famously wrote** that a grid “is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature.”

But when **Cynthia Hawkins** paints her grids, they tend to warp and stretch, then disassemble altogether amid a profusion of warmly colored circles and lines. Her paintings—many of them measuring six feet or more—feel jubilant, her grids superimposed over roaring swatches in dazzling hues like pink and yellow. Hawkins’s paintings defy Krauss’s dictum, showing what it looks like when an artist uses the tools of reason only to upend them.

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Her abstract paintings contain many layers: grids atop monochromes, shapes floating across the grids, lines running above those shapes. Many artists carefully think through how they want to arrange so much visual material, but Hawkins doesn't conceive her compositions in advance, preferring instead to let her ideas run free on the canvas. "I like this way of working with abstraction," Hawkins said recently, speaking from her studio in Poughkeepsie, New York. "I make the rules."

Hawkins, 75, has been making her own rules since the 1970s, but only recently has much of the art world taken note. Her paintings featured in the Museum of Modern Art's 2022 exhibition on Just Above Midtown (JAM), the iconic New York gallery run by Linda Goode Bryant where Hawkins debuted her sculptures and paintings during the late '70s and early '80s. Gallery representation followed that MoMA exhibition, with Paula Cooper in New York, Kaufmann Repetto in Milan, Hollybush Gardens in London, and Stars in Los Angeles, and top collectors, like Komal Shah, started lining up to buy her work. In 2024 the Center for Art, Research and Alliances gave her its Legacy Award. This fall, she will appear in the Bienal de São Paulo and an exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem dedicated to past artists in residence.



Detail of Hawkins's studio.
PHOTO CHRISTOPHER GARCIA VALLE/ARTNEWS

But in certain circles, Hawkins has always been a key figure. Just Above Midtown was instrumental in her meeting other artists: David Hammons, Howardena Pindell, Vivian E. Browne. A 1987–88 residency at the Studio Museum led to the museum's purchasing one of her works, and she has long been active in the community surrounding Kenkeleba House, the artist-run New York alternative space dedicated to the support of Black artists. Sculptor **Janet Olivia Henry** recently made a diorama commemorating her friendship with Hawkins, which was forged at JAM.

Now, Hawkins's work has begun to appear at fairs like Art Basel Miami Beach and auction houses like Christie's, where a 1989 painting sold last year for nearly \$120,000, quadrupling its high estimate.

Yet Hawkins remains humble as ever about her art and its recent reception. "I hate to say this, but it feels nice when people like it," she said.

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Hawkins working on a new series of paintings, titled "Chapter 4: Maps Necessary for a Walk in 4D."
PHOTO CHRISTOPHER GARCIA VALLE/ARTNEWS

The artist's home is likewise modest, with her studio situated at the end of a long, narrow driveway. Working from scratch in 2024, she and her husband, John, built the studio—a garage-like structure with tall shelving units for her paintings, tables with drawers for her prints, and few other furnishings. She spends her days there, working on multiple paintings at once. A strong work ethic is necessary for her prolific output—and to maintain her recent meteoric rise. Since the beginning of 2024, she has had three solo shows, and this summer, she was preparing for a fourth, at Hollybush Gardens in September. That must be a grind, I said. "It doesn't feel that way," she coolly replied.

Around the studio were several in-progress pieces that were to be shipped to London in August. She estimated that it takes about two weeks to produce a single painting. In addition to applying the paint, she said, "there's a bit of looking, walking around, looking, deciding on forms, all that kind of stuff." (In between, there's also a bit of bingeing YouTube videos, though she tries not to overindulge the habit.)

On tables arrayed around her studio sit worn-down pieces of oil bar—large, semi-hard sticks of paint that Hawkins drags across her canvases—and brushes of varying sizes arranged in pots. Amid her tools and materials were printouts of news stories, including one about 'Oumuamua, a mysterious interstellar object that was first discovered in 2017. She seemed to suggest she might take the shape of 'Oumuamua and use it in one of her paintings, just as she had with the outlines of rocks she saw while vacationing in Wales.



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Notebooks and paintbrushes in Hawkins's studio.
PHOTO CHRISTOPHER GARCIA VALLE/ARTNEWS

Hawkins divides her working process into two phases. "The first half of the painting is very spontaneous, very intuitive," she said. "The first color on the canvas is just a placeholder. It lets me know: *I've started.*" After painting her first forms in oil, Hawkins will then reach into what she called her "bag of tricks: all these sketches I've done of shapes I find in nature," such as the outlines of boulders. But, she said, "everything can change until the second half," when she will begin finishing her translations of those forms and applying the oil bar, which is harder to remove than regular oil paint.

In June, she was still in that first half for new entries in her ongoing series, "Maps Necessary for a Walk in 4D." Based on similarly titled drawings made in the late '70s, the series finds Hawkins plotting her route from her old Manhattan apartment to a nearby subway station on a map of the island, then tilting the city's grid, so that it appears distorted. The disturbed grids of these canvases represent the streets of New York. "New York at one point became laid out in an organized way, but that organization can be manipulated," Hawkins said. The resulting works are about the flow of time and the organization of space—and how abstraction can go a long way in shifting our perception of both.



Hawkins takes a break from an in-progress work, *Chapter 4: Maps Necessary for a Walk in 4D, #6.*
PHOTO CHRISTOPHER GARCIA VALLE/ARTNEWS

Hawkins had already begun to wonder whether the hues of these works couldn't be different. "I'm still deciding whether I should leave this green or take out some of it," she said, pointing to one curvaceous shape in a piece she would later title *Chapter 4: Maps Necessary for a Walk in 4D, #5.*

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Her work can feel like a throwback to the heyday of formalism, during the mid-20th century, when critics lavished acclaim on artists who paid special attention to depth, color, and geometry, just as Hawkins does. These days, formalism has become something of a taboo. Does she consider herself a formalist? “I *am* a formalist,” she said, eyeing me with suspicion before adding, “but I am not at all into things being perfect. That would be too frustrating.”



Untitled works on paper by Hawkins.
PHOTO CHRISTOPHER GARCIA VALLE/ARTNEWS

At the opening of MoMA's 2022 show about JAM, Hawkins ran into Bryant, the gallery's founder, for the first time in decades. “She looked at me and she said, ‘Cynthia is always doing it her own way,’” Hawkins said. “And it’s true, you know? I don’t think of myself as a rebel or something, but I won’t take no for answer, and if you say no, then I’ll just go around the back or the side.”

Hawkins has been doing it her own way for quite a long time. Her career has followed an unusual arc, with little time spent in New York City, even though she was born in Queens in 1950. The first in her family to go to college, she enrolled at Queens College in the mid-'70s. There was no question in her mind that she would study anything other than art. “People would always wonder what to paint,” she recalled of her fellow students. “I could never understand that.”

She earned her BFA in 1977, and since then, life has taken her outside the city. She has taken teaching posts at SUNY Rockland Community College, SUNY Geneseo, and other schools over the past five decades. She got her MFA at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore in 1992. From 2000 to 2003, she was the leader of the museum at Cedar Crest College in Allentown, Pennsylvania; then, from 2007 to 2021, she directed SUNY Geneseo's gallery. She got an MA in museum studies at Seton Hall University in New Jersey in 2008. “I had to compete with younger people,” she said of her decision to get a degree in that field.



Hawkins's in-progress painting *Chapter 4: Maps Necessary for a Walk in 4D, #5* (above).
PHOTO CHRISTOPHER GARCIA VALLE/ARTNEWS

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More recently, Hawkins went back for a PhD in American studies from SUNY Buffalo; her 2019 dissertation was titled “African American Agency and the Art Object, 1868–1917.” Her studio in Poughkeepsie, accessible from Manhattan by two-hour train ride followed by a short drive, is the closest she has been to an art hub in quite some time. Why did she remain outside New York for so long? “It was just real happenstance,” she said.

Her initial decision to become an abstract painter was also unplanned. As an undergrad, Hawkins began not with abstraction but with figuration, repeatedly drawing gymnasts using parallel bars and balance beams. Displeased with the results, she allowed these images to gradually come apart to form fields of intersecting lines. These early works recalled the paintings of trees by the Dutch modernist Piet Mondrian, whom Hawkins continues to credit as an influence, alongside Hans Hofmann and Johannes Vermeer.

After college, Hawkins developed an interest in black holes, the fourth dimension, and algebra. Between 1979 and 1981, she briefly turned to sculpture, showing her early forays into that medium at Just Above Midtown. Then, during the early '80s, she went back to painting, making pieces that were filled with arrows and other symbols. She later tossed some of the older three-dimensional works during a move, and anyway, as she wrote in *Art Notes, Art*, a 2024 book of her diaries from her sculpture-centric period, “I was and continue to be a painter.”



PHOTO CHRISTOPHER GARCIA VALLE/ARTNEWS



Details from Hawkins's studio, including oil sticks (top) and stencils and cups of paint (above).

PHOTO CHRISTOPHER GARCIA VALLE/ARTNEWS

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Many of Hawkins's paintings from the '80s onward are intentionally mysterious: She undertook them as inquiries into ideas and phenomena that she herself wanted to understand. Her 1986 series "Investigation into Green," for example, is a group of slender canvases that explore their titular hue by way of other tones, with one piece composed mainly of violet. "I was like, 'Hello, what can green be?'" Hawkins recalled. "I thought it was a really hard color to work with, so I made 10 paintings."

In the decades since, Hawkins has continued to pose challenges for herself via painting. But to ease the difficulty, she will often find amusement in lower-stake and smaller-scale works. With a smile, she retrieved some prints from drawers in her studio. They looked like the paintings arranged nearby, except that the prints were sparer and looser, with sinuous lines accompanied by fewer floating shapes. If she weren't making enough new work to support one solo show every six months, she said, "I would be doing some prints, a little more work on paper. I would be having a little fun."

A version of this article appears in the annual Top 200 Collectors issue, under the title "Cynthia Hawkins Paints a Picture."