

Midway:

a Collectif  
Génération  
collaboration

John Yau &  
Kathy Barry



John Yau

MIDWAY

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OBJECTSPACE

Midway: a Collectif Génération collaboration  
by John Yau & Kathy Barry

Visual Magic  
John Yau

Kathy Barry, who works in graphite pencil and watercolor on paper, simultaneously constructs and discovers a grid, and each one is different. Her work is a record of the grid's emergence into the visible. Her way of working connects to the visionary artist and healer, Emma Kunz (1892 – 1963), who did large format drawings on graph paper. While there is a formal connection between Kunz and Barry, I think the bond goes deeper than that. In historical surveys of the first decades of abstraction, such as *Inventing Abstraction 1910 – 1925* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (December 23, 2012 – April 15, 2013), the emphasis has been on the visible history, and the work of artists such as Vasily Kandinsky, Fernand Léger, Robert Delaunay, Frantisek Kupka, and Francis Picabia. But, as we have all come to recognize ever since the narrative of progress was challenged, particularly in this century, history is messy.

As we now know, the visible or public history of abstraction constitutes only a small part of what actually happened. Another history of abstraction, which is occult or hidden, can be gleaned from the work of three artists, all women, who did not exhibit in their lifetime: Georgiana Houghton (1814 – 1884), Hilma af Klint (1862 – 1944), and Emma Kunz (1892 – 1963). One reason they did not show in their lifetime was that they believed the world was not ready for their work, and, in more ways than we may wish to acknowledge, they were right.

The work of these three women challenges the narrative of abstraction that culminates in monochromatic painting and Minimalism. This is especially important because the narrative of abstraction is largely told through the accomplishments of male artists and is rooted in a patriarchal view of history. For Barry, the work of Kunz and others enables her to move past this patriarchal telling and enter a territory with roots in an alternative history. It is a history that I have been interested in, both as a critic and a poet, for nearly forty years.

This is what happened when I opened the package sent to me by Gervais Jassaud. I was immediately struck by Barry's work – and I am thinking of what her dynamic grids did to the pages of *Midway*, a selection of my poems published by Jassaud under his imprint Collectif Génération.

The first thought I had was that Barry had somehow made the pages feel bigger. It was as if they were beginning to stretch out into space, not the physical space beyond their edges, but the cosmic space beyond their material existence. The elongated rectangles, trapezoids, and triangles – their reds and yellows – directed my attention beyond the physical plane of the paper – which is an unsettling experience for a poet who wants the words on the page to be the focus of one's attention. And yet, paradoxically, I found this unexpected experience immensely satisfying.

The second thought, which is intertwined with the first, is that the plane of the paper became topsy-turvy, and that it seemed to be continually reorienting itself in space. I quickly realized that Barry was making the words seem active participants in this visual drama, and that they were not just vertical letters impressed into the paper. By framing the title, *Midway*, with a yellow and dark red grid that seems both complete and incomplete, she underscores that time is passing, and that nothing has reached completion. The viewer and reader are what complete this work. Each person who encounters this book will complete it differently. We all know this, but I cannot think of another abstract artist who makes this fact so palpably evident. That is the magic – and I don't think any other word is appropriate – that Barry has performed through drawing and painting. There is something radical and direct about her means, which I think would appeal to any poet, and certainly does to me. I feel incredibly lucky to have had her respond to my work, and to have had Gervais Jassaud invite us to collaborate.



Kathy Barry  
*Midway* (2017)

Published on the occasion of the work *Midway: a Collectif Génération* collaboration by John Yau & Kathy Barry, for the Chartwell Gallery, Objectspace, October 2017.

*Midway* brings to exhibition one of twelve handmade artist-books which have been produced in collaboration between American poet John Yau, and local visual artist Kathy Barry. Commissioned by bookmaker Gervais Jassaud for his ongoing Collectif Génération project, *Midway* is one of the most recent iterations of the Collectif Génération mission; to bring artists and writers from different parts of the world into conversation, so that they might work and think together in the arena of material production.

Kathy Barry is a visual artist who lives and works in Auckland. Kathy has exhibited in artist-run spaces, private galleries, as well as public art institutions throughout New Zealand and internationally. Most recently she was commissioned by the 32nd Bienal de São Paulo to participate in *INCERTEZA VIVA/Live Uncertainty* (2016). Her work is held in numerous collections including: The University of Auckland Art Collection; the Wellington City Council Art Collection and The James Wallace Arts Trust Collection.

John Yau is a poet, essayist, critic, and publisher who lives and works in New York City. He has published many books and collaborated with numerous artists. He co-founded the online magazine, *Hyperallergic Weekend*, and currently teaches art history and criticism at Mason Gross School of the Arts (Rutgers University).

Air space and wind harp—Kathy Barry's drawings for *Midway*  
Gregory O'Brien

The fibers of all things have their tension and are strained like the strings of an instrument. —Henry David Thoreau

Door and trampoline

Commonly, each page of a book functions like a door, hinged to its spine and granting the reader access to the page that follows or, less often, the one before. The book's cover is a double door containing all the other doors.

Kathy Barry's works in *Midway*, however, proffer a different book-concept—one in which we experience each page or two-page-spread more as the surface of a trampoline, pulled taut to the edge of each folio or sheet, and upon which verbal and visual elements leap, play and come to a kind of animated life. As we are led onwards by John Yau's unfolding poetry, the desire to turn the page is countered by the need to linger and contemplate Barry's enigmatic, alluring entanglements of form and space.

Horizontal

In a book, each typeset line is an horizon, along which the eye travels before diving down and ducking back to begin again at the left-hand margin. Painterly convention usually allocates only one horizon per image, although the abstract compositions of Kathy Barry, with their many flat and tilted horizons, their overlapping and disorienting lines, their vanishing points and their detoned, fractured space, are a strident departure.

Exercise

As on a trampoline, everything drifts towards the centre—the middle point, the midway. Barry and Yau's collaboration embodies such a meeting point or nexus: between an American poet and a New Zealand artist. In the shared, resonating, rebounding space of the open page, shards of colour gather around the edges of the typeset poetry. Barry's pencil lines glide past the typeset lettering to suggest a deep space behind them. An inside. Far from offering a conventional flow or narrative, the book becomes an energetic routine, a field exercise, with all its crossings and recrossings. A renegotiation and rethinking of the page-space.

Breath

Each page of *Midway* might also be described as a unit of time, or an outward breath, followed by a pause—an intake of air—as the leaf is turned over, be it by the hand of the reader or a gust of wind. The book becomes a dynamic principle, both catalyst and vehicle. No matter what punctuation it contains, it is its own punctuation. Also, in the state of being read, it becomes a kinetic sculpture, moving beyond the flatness of its surfaces to occupy a three- or four-dimensional space. Left alone—open or closed—the book claims a shallower three-dimensional space, the front cover or open spread upraised on its mound of preceding and/or following pages.

Compression

Kathy Barry's use of line and colour neither disturbs nor disguises the poetry. Neither does it necessarily elaborate upon or illustrate it. What the artist offers is an environment in which the words tremor with non-verbal possibility—a kind of parallelism very much in the spirit of Sonia Delaunay's 1913 collaboration with Blaise Cendrars, *The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jehanne of Paris*. Importantly, as critic Timothy Young has written, the Delaunay/Cendrars collaboration 'championed the concurrent expression of art (mainly in the form of abstracted shapes and colours) with text'. In a similar spirit of high modernist aspiration, with a synchronous embrace of mystical and alchemical possibility, the offerings of Barry and Yau share the 'continuous present' of simultanéisme.

To the lyrical compression and refinement of Yau's poetry, Barry's drawings offer a counter movement—a visual de-compression: they push outwards to the four sides of the page. At times, the solid clump of typeset verse resembles a rock thrown into a pond—the surrounding coloured forms creating a lively, clamorous splash. In this process of compression and release, we witness another kind of kineticism.

Instrumental

Kathy Barry offers a setting for the poems—not so much in the sense of a physical backdrop, but in the musical sense. With their harmonies and their discordances, the drawings are a percussive, angular accompaniment—seemingly improvised, or composed according to principles or a process the viewer can only guess at.

Each copy of the book is its own unique moment. Each page. While Yau's handprinted words are consistent across the edition, with each copy Barry's elaborations begin again from scratch. In each case, the pencil takes a different tack. The machine starts up. I am thinking of a hazy white sky criss-crossed by vapour trails. Lines etched upon a sundial. A spider's web. A wire sculpture or children's string game. The shattered pane of a window. Or lines strung between non-existent survey pegs. A trans-dimensional space.

One iteration of the book uses only the colour yellow—another is brightly checkered. Colours are raised. In Barry's pencil- and brush-work, we witness a notion of art-making as a variation on flag- or kite-flying, tent-raising, sail-setting, the laying of all kinds of nets, celestial as well as earthly. It is an act of suspension, of orchestrated tension, of rewiring and restringing. The resulting book is both instrument—a wind harp, by my reckoning—and musical score. Each page of *Midway* is also a resonating body, a tympanum or membrane upon which the poet's voice reverberates, and from which letters, words, lines, colours and spaces leap into a further life.

Gregory O'Brien is a poet, painter and writer. His most recent books include *Whale Years* (AUP, 2015) and *See What I Can See: New Zealand Photography for the Young and Curious* (AUP, 2015)

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