

# Lorna Ritz: A Genius Reinvents Abstraction for the Modern Era

**BY MIA MANN-SHAFIR**



Today Ritz lauds the gallerist's expertise and natural insight, insisting that the collaboration has taught her the value of sequencing, and exposed her to the nuance involved in curation. Looking at an old painting she made – one of the works on display in the show – Ritz cocks her head, studying strokes of red, which flow into orange, until their disruption by blobs of green. To an untrained eye, the work appears loose, free, like the hand responsible for it was a relatively uninhibited one.

But Ritz insists that this work was actually quite “intellectual.” When she made it, she did not feel so free. She felt concerned with exactly how to go about everything, where to put which color, in what quantity, and why– the whole thing was overwhelmingly heady. Lorna Ritz shares a name with a certain luxury hotel chain with outposts in the world's greatest metropolises, but the artist herself is from central Massachusetts, born in the town of Worcester in 1947. Most of her time since then

has been spent in a painting studio. “I paint the whole day,” she says. This past spring she was told that she needed surgery for her shoulder, but she couldn't bear to miss the summer season of painting. All those many hours before the canvas have paid off in a deft and subtle skill that was on display this past summer at YveYANG Gallery. In an ambitious exhibition that spanned 20 years, we saw the immense skill of Lorna Ritz, a doyenne at the height of her power.



Because Ritz just keeps getting better, her newest work is also her best work. However, the YveYANG show charted not only the pinnacle of Lorna's career, but the entirety of its mature phase, with the earliest work dating back to 2002. Initially, Lorna felt resistant to this, but the gallery's owner Yve Yang helped her to see the value in including a range. "Free" is a word that Ritz uses a lot when she talks about her art. Now, so many years into her career, it's also the way she feels most of the time. "The difference," she said, between this moment, where she is a seasoned painter, and before, when she was a novice one, is that she has "enough skill to know how to get colors rhythmically timed with each other." Now that she's got this part down pat – the logistics, the order, the construction – she is able to fully "indulge in the freedom of painting." The product of this "freedom," practiced by Ritz, is really quite striking.

"I'm at a dance party," she says, clarifying: "With the newer paintings, I'm at a dance party." Note, she does not say, "it's like I'm at a dance party" – Lorna is at a dance party, she insists, and she feels it in her whole being. The viewer gets to enjoy the site of this party's aftermath – not the brushes left out on the table, or the still-half full cups of paint water, but the paintings themselves: her work is a product of unbounded joy. The brushes and the water remain on the paint-covered surfaces of her studio in Amherst, Massachusetts, where Lorna has constructed an oasis.

While there are very few waking hours that Ritz fills with something other than painting, there is one daily ritual – a non-painting related one – from which she refuses to part.

After painting all day, when the sky is darkening but not yet dark, she opens the door to the outside world. She steps out into it. "Watching the sun fall" means paying particular attention to the trees and the ground, on which the diminishing rays cast colors and patterns. She notices the particular blue of that day's sky. Not only because color is something Ritz thinks about more than most people do, but also because she has studied this sky, from right here, from this same vantage point, every single day, for a long while now.

Special attention is paid to the place in the sky where the mountains meet the sun. Ritz refers to this ritual as her "night walk." The night walk is the culmination of a day spent dancing in the world of paint. "I have all the day's painting in mind," Ritz says, of her headspace during nightwalks. Since her paintings are an ode to nature, to the hills and the mountains and the sky and the grass of Amherst Massachusetts, it only makes sense that every day should end like this.

The way she talks about the night walk ritual, suggests that it is actually more of an opening ceremony than a closing one. She says that each night, inspired by the walk, she is "able to take something into the next day's painting work." Thoughts and observations gleaned from the night walk setup whatever will happen in the studio the following day. It all seeps in overnight, the questions and the epiphanies and everything in between. When the morning comes, Lorna can get right to work. Approaching eighty, Lorna Ritz is still colored by an abundant dose of curiosity.

It's been a while since she settled back in New England. Before that she left the region for a brief stint that included time in New Mexico. She is still inspired by the Taos scenery. She remembers meeting someone there, who, upon hearing where she was from, said that they did not like New England because of how green it was.

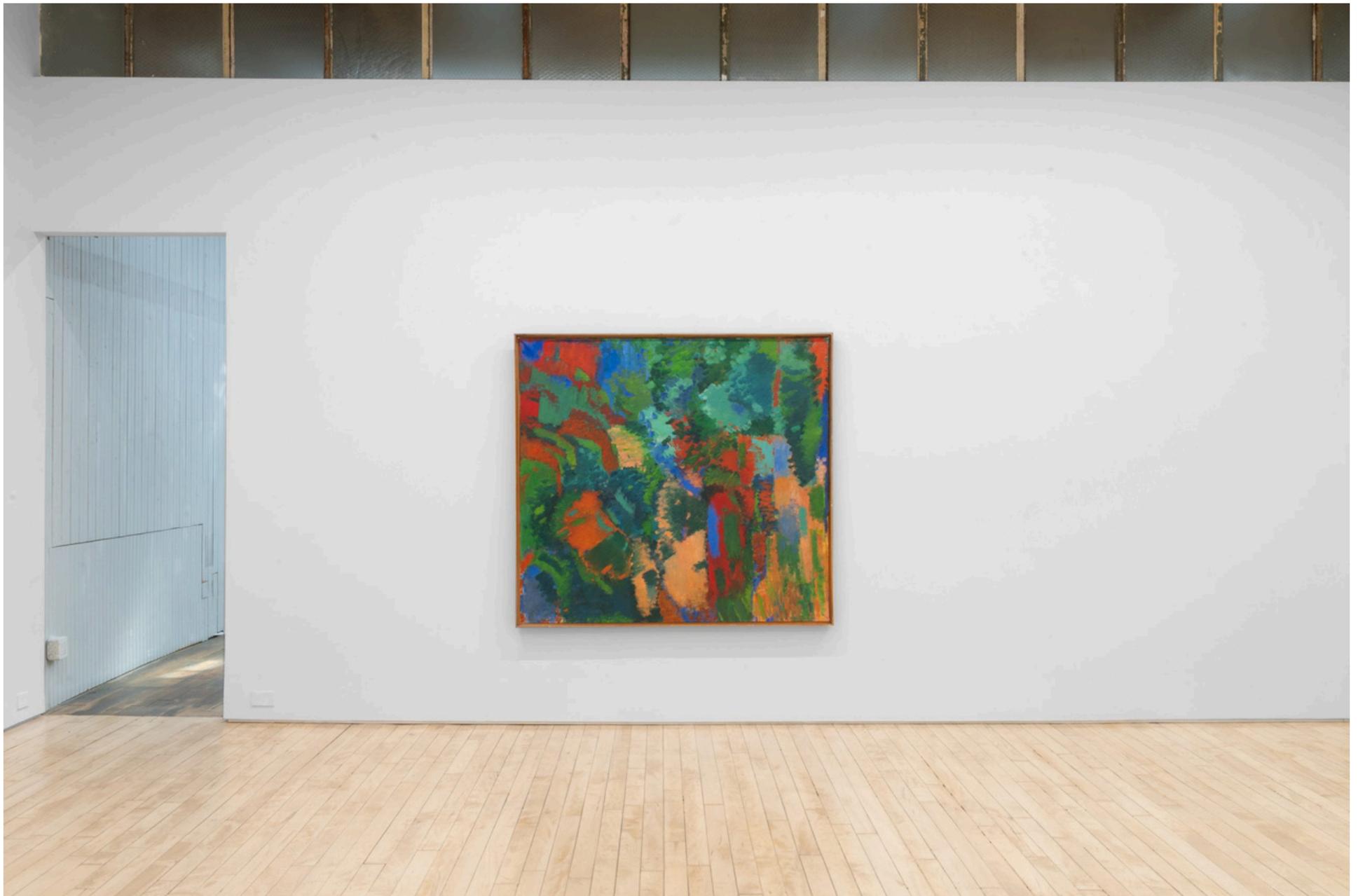
"That's exactly what I love about it," she says. If Lorna could live anywhere else, she would live where Claude Monet painted: Giverny, in northern France's Normandy. Monet is one of her greatest inspirations, as is Joan Mitchell, an American painter who expatriated to a French region just outside of Paris. Lorna is in awe of the way Mitchell went about her work, standing at a great distance from her paintings so as to appreciate them in their entirety, and make decisions with a more holistic perspective. Lorna, conversely, works from right up close. The third of Ritz's great painting idols is, unsurprisingly, Vincent Van Gogh. One day, earlier in her career, Lorna took a group of students to see a collection dedicated to Van Gogh. Standing in the museum, she heard the painter's voice emanate from one of his paintings. A student approached just as Ritz had started to respond to him, and asked to whom she was speaking. Needless to say, only Ritz could hear the painter's voice. "He told me, just keep doing what you're doing," she recounts. Painting, especially from the rural landscape in which Lorna resides, can be a lonely kind of existence. But, like Van Gogh did that day, the paintings keep her company. "

**“I’m at a dance party,” ... When she’s there, her feet “know the steps” – she knows exactly where and how to mix yellow and green, make the perfect orange, and save just enough space for sky blue.**



They talk to me all the time,” Ritz says, adding that when they came to take them away – for the gallery show her “heart dropped” right out of her. Despite her intense attachment to the works, Ritz has no doubt that this stage, the one in which the outside world sees her work, is a crucial part of the process. Lorna says that in order to paint something, she has to fall in love with it. Her work is a highly emotional and solitary process, but at the same time, it is deeply communal.

When she paints a landscape, she has to remain “constantly aware of where and how things are relating to each other.” The same is true of herself, and the people around her. “I’m opening my heart up on the canvas and I want people to see those feelings,” Ritz explains. Her work is abstract, and sometimes people don’t immediately get it. But “they need to get through that impasse” she says – and, according to Lorna, “it really does work, everytime– just as long as they’re patient enough, and listen to how I tell them to look at the painting.”



Even when a painting is done, Lorna's time with it is not. The reception her work receives matters a lot to her. Lorna stresses that this dynamic, this final phase, "is a very exciting exchange." Ritz has become very good at reading peoples' responses to her art, gauging body language and physical cues to interpret how a viewer is receiving her work. A process that was once highly individual, in that moment, becomes a "dialogue."

Lorna Ritz disappears, retreating into her solitude because it is there, in a studio in Amherst, Massachusetts, where she gets to act on the creative initiative that defines her life. But once she's ready, boy is she ready, to meet back up with the world, and start the conversation, for which green, yellow, blue, red dance-party fueled paintings are the fodder. A lifetime's collection of this work is available through YveYANG Gallery, waiting to be met in its final stage.