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Gudrun Mertes-Frady was born in Cologne, Germany, where she received her education in painting and art history at the Kölner Werschule (Academy for Art and Design). She moved to New York in 1981. The artist's paintings and drawings have been exhibited in the US and Europe over the past twenty years, including in fifteen solo exhibitions. Her work appears in numerous public and private collections, among them the Busch-Reisinger Museum of Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; Rockefeller University, New York City; and the Werner Kramarsky Collection, New York City.

Julie Karabenick: Have you always worked abstractly?

Gudrun Mertes-Frady: My focus has always been abstract art. I'm attracted to its reduction of the "real" to its essence, to its total freedom of formulation. My interest is in the mathematics of the surface. Abstraction takes more than seeing—it takes contemplation. My aim is to elicit magic, a feeling of something that can't be grasped with the head only. That is what interests me when I look at art—I want that experience.

JK: Over the years, it's striking how you reinvent yourself with each new body of work.

G M-F: I was never after a particular style. I wanted to be receptive to all the art around me. I like today's pluralism where everything goes. It suits my restless nature. I'm driven to move ahead, to reach beyond myself.

JK: You describe an interval of struggle that typically precedes each new group of work.

G M-F: I always go through a period of intense struggle when I start new work. Unfortunately, this process never seems to get easier over time. I may start out by looking at my last work and may work in that direction for a while, but that is never a satisfying undertaking. I don't like to see work come up that could have been in my last show. I have no idea where the new work wants to go, and out of this insecurity—during which I sometimes feel that I will never paint another good picture—comes this struggle. This can take many months until a new form reveals itself and I can accept it.

JK: So you generally work in series.

G M-F: Looking back over my work, I see clearly that I am working in series with a definite beginning and end. When I hit upon something that excites me, I pursue it until it comes to a natural end. When I have exhausted one form, I get very distracted and restless—I feel I'm copying myself. Then I begin thinking about how I can move forward again. The first steps into new work are very tentative, and I am wracked with doubt until I finally find a form in which I feel at home, in which I move around with confidence. I'm always surprised that this happens this way again and again, but over the years, I have attained this crazy trust—that my subconscious will rally forth whatever is necessary to move me along. I often remind myself of a saying by Goethe, "You never go further than when you don't know where you are going."

JK: The way you sometimes describe your process, it sounds as though there are two wills involved—yours and that of the painting.

G M-F: I actually try to find out what the painting wants from me. I sometimes have the distinct feeling that I feed the canvas with color and form, and it either accepts my choice or it rejects it. So I flounder between trial and error until I make the right decision. I am always waiting for that instant in which the painting snaps into focus. I depend most of all on this gut feeling. Sometimes, the painting may respond favorably to one of my arbitrary choices, but I can't agree just yet and I try to resist its choice. A battle begins. I always loose in the end. Only when I let go of my preconceptions and just follow can I truly arrive at something new and surprising. I know this must sound very strange, but this is the relationship I have with my work. It needs me to bring it to life and I need it to keep me living, physically and spiritually.

JK: So you don't work out your ideas in advance?

G M-F: There is never any preliminary sketching, and I never do any smaller studies that have been successful. I have tried, but these efforts usually go nowhere. Many of my friends find their computers a very helpful step. I have tried this, too, and the images I print out are in themselves interesting, but I was never able to translate them into my work on canvas. It all has to happen on the actual painting space. Only then can I achieve the dynamic I am after. I don't want to have a completed concept before I start because I'm afraid I might exclude something important by following my self-imposed rules. I want the work to be in a state of becoming, to be open to receive the unexpected.

JK: You were born in Cologne, Germany and grew up in a very art-oriented environment.

G M-F: I was born into an artist community. My parents and most of their friends were artists. Inspiration seemed to flow from all sides. On visits with my parents to their friends, I remember being in various studios where all the children were given art materials to keep them occupied while the adults talked. This could mean clay in one studio, paint and paper

in another, even wool for spinning and weaving in yet another. Growing up, I thought that all people ever did in this world was make art. There seemed to be competition among parents—every one of them wanted to have the most imaginative child. We all worked with great intensity, and the successful works were pointed out and put on the wall. All the children were very talented, and it was not easy to produce works that stood out. Even then, I liked nothing better than making things, creating my own universe and living inside it.

JK: Your passion for color dates to your childhood.

G M-F: My mother introduced me to the paintings of Emil Nolde. I was moved by their vivid color and passionate images. I could totally submerse myself into color then. I remember that in the summer, my mother's garden was overgrown with zinnias of the most extraordinary hues of reds, yellow, pinks and purples. My mother also introduced me to the paintings of Paula Moderson-Becker. I read her letters and admired her paintings for their simplicity and strength. Then, of course, there were Matisse and Picasso. As a child, I painted flowers `a la Nolde and interiors `a la Matisse over and over again.

JK: Much of your work has been described as "architectural." Might this tendency also date to your childhood?

G M-F: I believe my greatest influence was architecture. My parents were both architects. I was surrounded by geometry, by drawings on graph paper and by floor plans. Art and architecture books were everywhere, and I especially enjoyed looking at the Bauhaus books. I soon became interested in the Constructivists, in Malevich and Mondrian. The Constructivists interested me because of the spatial intelligence in their work. Since my only interest early on was in making things—painting, drawing, sculpture to the exclusion of almost everything else—I decided to attend the Kölner Werschule, an art school modeled after the Bauhaus School. Both my parents had gone there.

JK: And this experience wouldn't match your expectations?

G M-F: I enjoyed the Bauhaus aspect of the school, but the education was primarily geared to traditional teaching, with a lot of life drawing classes and drawing from plaster casts. My time there was not very memorable. I had been exposed to so much more variety and ideas—it seemed almost limiting.

JK: You moved to the US in 1968 to Atlanta with your husband who was a scientist.

G M-F: Yes. I wanted to connect to the art community immediately. I signed up for classes at the Atlanta School of Art. I was full of energy and had the idea that I could open a gallery with my new artist friends. We rented a space very inexpensively, and it turned into a very attractive gallery. Unfortunately, we had to close after the area had become unsafe and people avoided it.

JK: Even in your early paintings, we can see a penchant for geometric shapes and for structure.

G M-F: The paintings at this time were about color and very simple form. I remember reading a lot of Haiku poetry at that time. It helped me escape into a place away from all the common dramas of life. The loss of our gallery space coincided with my move to another neighborhood. I lost contact with some of my artist friends and felt isolated. There was not much art to be seen in Atlanta in the 70s, and the art I saw in magazines seemed very restrained and minimal. Then one day, I literally fell over a large book by Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larson called Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric with extraordinary images of fiber art. I was stunned by the power of these works and immediately felt it was a direction I wanted to explore. I invented an off-the-loom process by which I could make wall-sized, very sculptural pieces from wire and sisal.

My creative energy was channeled again, and, to my great surprise, people responded extremely favorably to these wall pieces, and each found a collector within days. Two of them found their way into the collection of Rockefeller University in New York. The sisal pieces were a great interval to play with space and design, but my hands were always blistery and bleeding from the rough materials, and I had to bring this phase to a natural conclusion.

JK: You moved on to some collage work, and, as with the sisal pieces, their geometric underpinnings are clear.

G M-F: I could not quite give up fabric altogether, so the new pieces included natural linen, wire, gold leaf, metal and mirror strips wrapped in copper wire. These works were very small, mysterious and intimate. They were "icons" of some more spiritual image. The underlying element in these pieces was the grid. During my years in Atlanta, I always felt I was living in the wrong place. I traveled as often as I could to Europe and New York. In 1981, I moved to New York, now totally committed to my work. I instantly knew I had landed in the right place, and things started to happen. My first studio space was on 29th Street with a spectacular view of the Empire State Building. At the time, I had not reconnected with painting, and I continued with the assemblages for a while, mostly in black and white and incorporating wood pieces now.

JK: As we look at a group of works from this period, they seem more minimal than the earlier Icons and sisal works. I sense the influence of the Constructivists and Malevich, and paint seems to become a more important element.

G M-F: The Constructivists Malevich, and Mondrian were a great influence. But more and more, I missed painting. I felt constrained by the limitations of the minimal aspect of the assemblages.

JK: What types of painting were you looking at that time—the early 80s?

G M-F: There was a lot of intense painting going on in New York and Cologne. It seemed refreshing to see the works of Salle, Mitchell, Borofsky, Martin; the Italians Clemente, Chia, Cucchi; the Germans Baselitz, Lupertz, and Richter, among many others. It inspired me to get back to painting. It was a heady experience to paint again—a great time for experimentation, to find out what kind of magic could still be elicited from this basic material.

JK: There's a very primordial feeling to this new work.

G M-F: At this time, I was striving to reveal a language through a matrix of form and color, my own language beyond words describing states of being. I started a series of paintings, which were later shown in an exhibition with the title Genesis.

JK: Quite a stylistic shift from the assemblages.

G M-F: In this piece, I may have been inspired by the drama of the sunsets over the Hudson River, messing with paint again after the precisioned discipline I had put myself through working with the assemblages. The two paintings below came about a few years later. I had restricted my palette somewhat. I felt that I had gone through a period of total immersion in the full color spectrum, and my natural desire was now to narrow my field of action a bit.

JK: And the grid starts to reassert itself.

G M-F: In all my work, the grid is the underlying matrix. When I returned to painting in 1983, the grid was more submerged. The paintings from this period were not consciously structured. I believed that the painting was in the paint, and that it was my job to find it. I had to be in a highly sensitized state to recognize it and not let it slip away—often a split-second decision. If I missed, the process had to start over again—an intuitive process in the beginning, but over time as the grid emerged more prominently, it felt right and I let it come in.

JK: It sounds as though, despite numerous visual influences as you were growing up that might have inclined you toward geometry, your belief in the primacy of geometric form emerged through your daily studio practice.

G M-F: The power of geometry is always confirmed by my own art-making; it asserts itself without conscious decision. At times, I try to resist it because I think I can do without it, but then, my work feels lacking. Only when I touch on certain parameters of some intrinsic matrix does it snap into focus.

JK: Soon you took another break from painting.

G M-F: Yes—but only for about a year. In 1988 my restless nature needed a new direction, and I started to work exclusively on paper. The drawings all were done in charcoal, graphite, and metallic stick—no color here. I developed a new process and wanted to explore its limits. I was not sure how this period would affect my work on canvas. What slowly emerged was that all the paintings wanted to be red—red in all its hues and permutations. I used red because it is the most difficult color, and it became a new challenge for me to explore all of its physical and emotional properties. I had a need to find out what this single color could evoke beyond its materiality.

JK: As this work progressed, many paintings from this period were structured with tall vertical bands and stripes.

G M-F: With the circular element, there appeared a sense of motion, everything in flux, forever changing. To let go of the vertical striping was almost as difficult as giving up red, but one day I took the plunge, and it was very freeing. I explored this new form to the hilt. I made myself a proper tool and could now fill large spaces, build whole universes. I would add paint in many layers and then partially scrape them back to expose the underlying colors.

JK: The grid really starts to reassert itself in some of the subsequent work. You can feel the strong horizontals and verticals in the lush paint application.

G M-F: The directional strokes were made with a wide palette knife. I moved the blade vertically and horizontally across the canvas, pushing the many underlying layers to expose the color beneath. Gone were the circular forms. I never varied from the 90º angles that I achieved this way. It was a necessary stabilizing element in contrast to the dizzying effect of my use of the full color spectrum. I worked on these pieces until they looked sensuous. I was blatantly going for pleasure. The work from 2000 shows my process of layering the paint and scraping it back—digging deep inside to expose color and adding more paint and repeating the scraping in vertical and horizontal movements of my tool, forming a loosely defined grid. I was very much aware of my dualistic process of simplifying the surface in some areas by flattening it with unified color, and then increasing the complexity again by digging deeper into the layers to expose a lot of color.

JK: Your next series followed September 11, 2001.

G M-F: After September 11, which happened outside my studio window, I seemed to need more structure and clarity. I believe the severe divisions of space in these paintings represented my intense wish to overcome the shock and pain of this time in our history and to transform the paintings into images of power and even beauty. *Time Out* was the first painting I did after September 11. It has a very somber tone. The horizontal and vertical movements had stopped—only the vertical

Time Out, 2001, Oil on canvas, 63 x 60 in

remained. I used fewer layers—only two or three now—and the surface became more flat and smooth. My color range shifted markedly at the end of 2001 to more muted tones. I was using a 4 inch scraper tool for the vertical bands.

JK: As this work progressed, we begin to see strong architectural vertical and horizontal bars. Might this new work have been a sort of homage to your city, an assertion of its staying power?

G M-F: When I started this work, I was not aware of what was so obviously coming up in my work, but in retrospect, this is exactly what I was doing. At the end of 2002, the horizontal bands appeared. Re-Construction belongs to this new series. The 90º angle had become essential to me. I believe this happened because I had a great need for the horizontal as a solid ground. The vertical became the architecture and the human beings solidly standing on it. Nothing was leaning or falling.

JK: Some of these paintings are extremely luminous.

G M-F: In this painting, I used a background color that in a certain light looks almost grey and would oscillate with the cadmium foreground.

JK: The structural elements in the later works in this series seem to be given greater breathing space.

G M-F: I wanted to convey a greater openness now. These paintings directly inform my latest work. Since the beginning of 2006, my work is less severely structured. The horizontal and vertical lines have almost completely disappeared. I felt released from the constraint of the 90º angles. Angled lines over arbitrarily layered color fields give structure now and a sense of motion, even more pronounced by my use of aluminum paint, which changes from bright light to a dark grey, giving the surface multi-dimensionality and a kinetic quality. My aim is to explore the contrasting painterly information with overlying architecture. The background of these paintings is applied in partially translucent layers. I work on this first stage—what is to become the background—until it is a complete and satisfying all-over image on its own. Only then do I fuse it with the geometric structure, covering the surface in angular bands, some connecting to the ends of my painting space and others just floating on top. I like this juxtaposition of the expressive space underneath the cool and edgy bands crossing it. For drawing the linear components, I use tape. I found out that to get the most interesting composition, I have to add the tape lines totally unselfconsciously: standing just elbows' length away from the painting and placing down the strips without stepping back, like drawing with the tape over the whole space at once. If I'm able to work with the greatest concentration, I usually like what I see. It never seems to work for me if I put down a line and then step back to consider my next move. What ensues this way is always completely uninteresting.

JK: This unselfconscious attitude seems fundamental to your approach to painting.

G M-F: An unselfconscious aspect is relevant to all my work. I feel I need to let things come in that I did not know about. This seems the only way to override my conscious brain and let my subconscious surprise me.

JK: The tape application process sounds a lot like automatic drawing.

G M-F: Yes—it feels like this. I work very fast in my aim to override my judgment time. Sometimes, I will go in later to make a few changes, taking out lines or adding connections, but these changes are minor. The basic composition stays intact if it was good. If not, I have to start the process over.

JK: In some of these works, you bisect the paintings.

G M-F: I have been experimenting with the horizontal divisions in just a few paintings now. It gives the work an extra dimension I like. I'm always ready for new possibilities.

JK: I'm struck by how you always seem to return to geometric form, albeit in a new guise.

G M-F: Geometry asserts itself in all my work no matter what I sometimes do to subdue it. I believe my use of the grid is not solely a conscious decision. I believe geometry and the grid are an inherent universal order that clicks into place at one point.

JK: While we may think of the grid as emblematic of Modernism, its roots run historically far deeper.

G M-F: I believe that the grid has been a powerful image from time immemorial. I recently saw a stunning documentary on PBS about cave paintings all over the world. Among the animals, the paintings also contained gridded images. The assumption is that all these extraordinary paintings were conceived in the dreams of the artist. Many years ago, I found a small slip of paper with just one line printed on it: Best Witchcraft Is Geometry. These four words resonated strongly with me, so much so that I kept them on my desk over these many years. It's the title of a poem by Emily Dickinson:

> Best Witchcraft is Geometry
> To the magician's mind—
> His ordinary acts are feats
> To thinking of mankind.
> - Emily Dickinson, "poem 1158", ca. 1870

Writing about Dickinson, Joyce Carol Oates comments on this poem:

> "The 'witchcraft' of art is (mere) geometry to the practitioner: by which is meant that it is orderly, natural, obedient to its own rules of logic; an ordinary event. What constitutes the feat is the relative ignorance of others—non-magicians."

JK: In Dickinson's scheme, I would definitely count you among the magicians. And I'm also reminded of your descriptions of your working process—how you respond to what the painting wants from you—and also of the restlessness you describe. To me, these are resonant with Oates' observation from the same essay:

> "Dickinson is most herself when she stands, like us, in awe of her remarkable powers as if sensing how little she controls them; how little, finally, the mute and unknowable Soul has to do with the restless, ever-improvising voice."