



*The International Code of Signals Paintings*

Germaine Koh

*August 27 – September 15, 1991*



# **Germaine Koh**

## **The International Code of Signals Paintings**

**August 27 – September 15, 1991**

**opening Tuesday August 27th, 8-10PM**

ARTISTS' CENTRE D'ARTISTES OTTAWA INC.  
**GALERIE 101 GALLERY**  
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### ■ **The necessity of work**

In the autumn of 1990 in a group show at GALLERY 101 Germaine Koh exhibited some compelling abstract paintings from a series called ESTABLISHING. Concerned with investigating the relation of the processes of drawing and painting, those oil paintings on unstretched canvases were tacked to the walls. (*Another Picture I*, August 23 – September 16, 1990. Also, for further information see also the notes below by Koh on her paintings). Some works from the present series of The International Code of Signals Paintings were exhibited in the gallery at Artscourt, Ottawa, in a group show called *MARCH 1991*, curated by Philip Fry. It seemed clear from that viewing, of part of the series of work, that the complete group of forty paintings deserves to be seen in whole as they were intended to be viewed.

Discussing her paintings with Germaine Koh is often surprising. What the act of painting demands, what a painting needs and what is unnecessary are described in emphatic terms. Such deeply-felt painting concerns are expressed outside of personal desire but indicate in outline a passionate and engaged dynamic of thought and feeling.

### ■ **Space of blankness and openness.**

The International Code of Signals Paintings are at first deceptively blank. They are paintings, however, based on grounds of red, yellow, blue, white and black planes in various geometric configurations. Why not just make monochrome paintings? Koh's simple answer is that it seems *unnecessary*, that working with blankness means constructing something and she is interested in work that can be done without the necessity of making something new.

Koh determined that she would start with something complete in itself—something that could be transferred whole. This is the international marine alphabet and code. It was important that there be limits which were not determined by the artist and that these begin and remain external to the actual work. Even the colour was arrived at not so much by choice but because this is what one gets by mixing together all the colours. It is a concern of Koh's to state that we may be fooling ourselves to think we can always create new things. In spite of the artists' disavowal of responsibility for their forms, because these paintings are based on a coded language there is a cool poetry inserted into their discourse.

Some paintings are exhibited stacked or turned to the wall and the surfaces are not visible. A similar gray colour paint glazes all of the paintings' surfaces. All the paintings rest on the floor. With these strategies a space of blankness and openness is created, a virtual space, where one is not allowed to say what that space is. It is a way of emptying out and bringing back to discussion differences in size and colour and experiencing these relations again. It is a way of displaying facts, and as importantly, withholding them. The paintings hardly seem to be on exhibit.

### ■ **Painting as work**

The paintings are actions both of erasing and accumulating, covering over and building up. The work performed on the coded alphabet integrates the structure with the painting. By bringing the code patterns back from their overt function as communication, in a kind of deflection, the structures are reclaimed. In these works there is an uneasy relation with modern painting iconography. Some of the signal codes evoke associations with venerable modernist geometric paintings, for example stripes and grids. But Koh is not owning any one shape and does not claim one particular structure as a personal psychic emblem.

*The signs are not mine. The work is mine.*

To further resist the a complacent assimilation of a system of signification, Koh has disregarded any necessity of carrying through the uniformity of size in the canvases. By varying the sizes and scale of the canvases Koh is subverting the usual systematic uniformity of size of the signal.

### ■ **Possibilities**

These paintings are fundamentally about the possibility of work, about freedom, about how to act (work, paint) in the face of unceasing and relentless systems of signification. In contemplating this installation of paintings in the gallery, the viewer is met with not merely defaced signs, erasure, and deflection, but a peculiarly anonymous, anxious production. A prevailing mood of the stacked, gray canvases is an uncanny refusal. Koh has chosen her process of working so she didn't have to make further choices about colour, form, and quantity of pieces.

*I do not need to insert myself into this process of making these paintings.*

*There is enough there already.*

The International Code of Signals Paintings address issues of language and meaning, and challenge assumptions about the purposes, uses, and values of contemporary painting. We are left with a negative definition of individuality, and almost all that remains is the work. The facticity of the paintings is liberating and incidentally beautiful. By focussing so intently on the *possibility* of production these paintings, these works, propose a definition for the embarkation of freedom.

Daniel Sharp  
Exhibition Curator

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