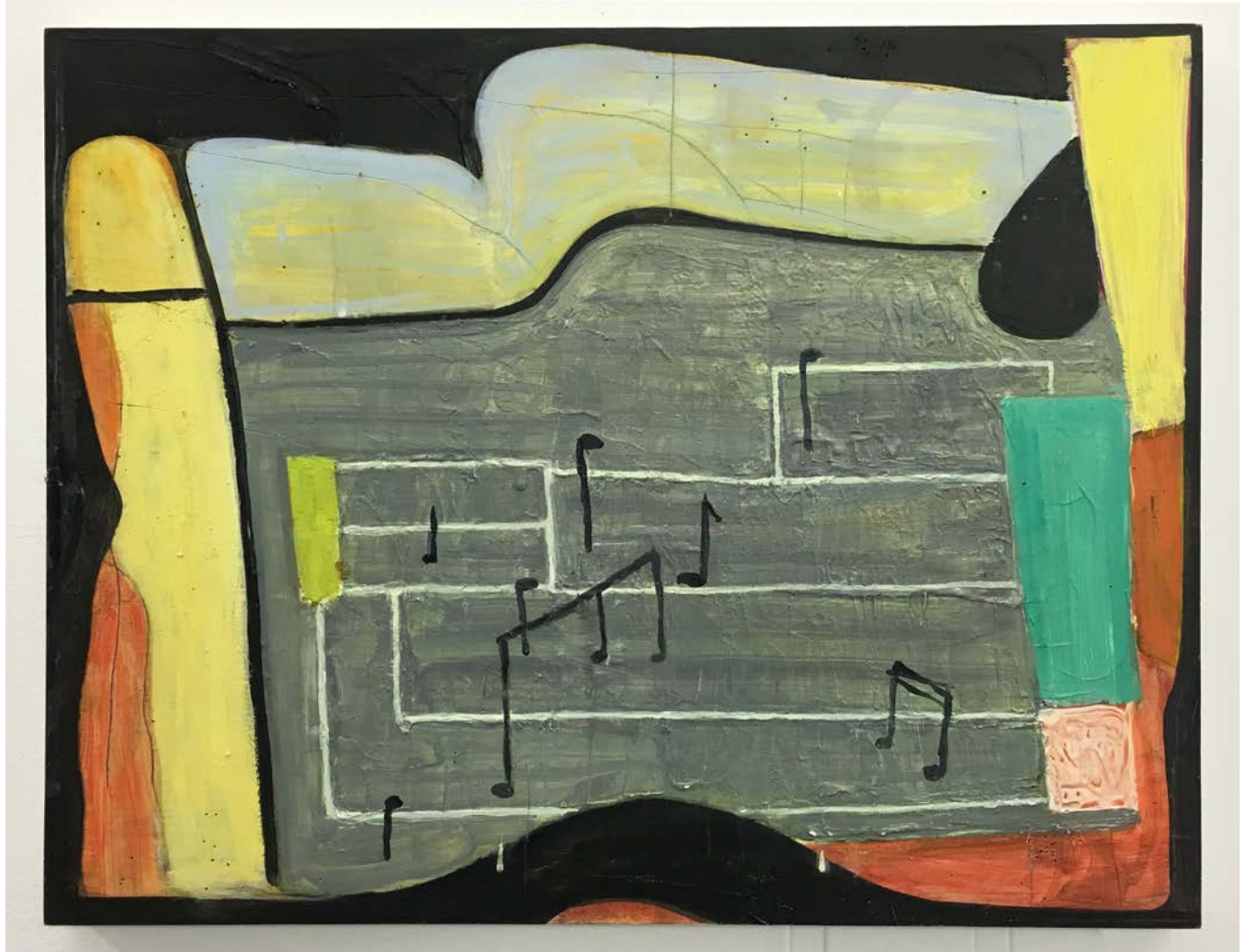


## A Charming Reverence for Color: Artists Revisit Paul Klee

by [Rob Colvin](#) on October 28, 2015



Brenda Goodman, “Untitled (A-15)” (2009), oil on wood, 14 x 18 in (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Paul Klee isn’t thought of as a 20th-century master for contemporary artists to mine from. Does he appear dated? A bit; maybe in the colors. They have a melodic structure, with slow crescendos in tone and saturation. But he used color differently anyhow, in his own time, and was a color theorist himself. He wrote once, after a 1914 trip to Tunisia: “Color and I are one. I am a painter.”

Artists, and here, curators Ashley Garrett and JJ Manford, are taking a second look at the work of the Swiss-born German artist (1879–1940). For Alfred Barr, Modernism’s biggest champion and director of the Museum of Modern Art, “not even Picasso approaches [Klee] in sheer inventiveness.” So it may be the 20-artist exhibition [Paul Klee](#) is worth at least a first look, and perhaps a second too.



Jason Saager, "Aerial Views of Subterranean Outer Space" (2015), oil on canvas over panel, 16 x 16 1/2 in.

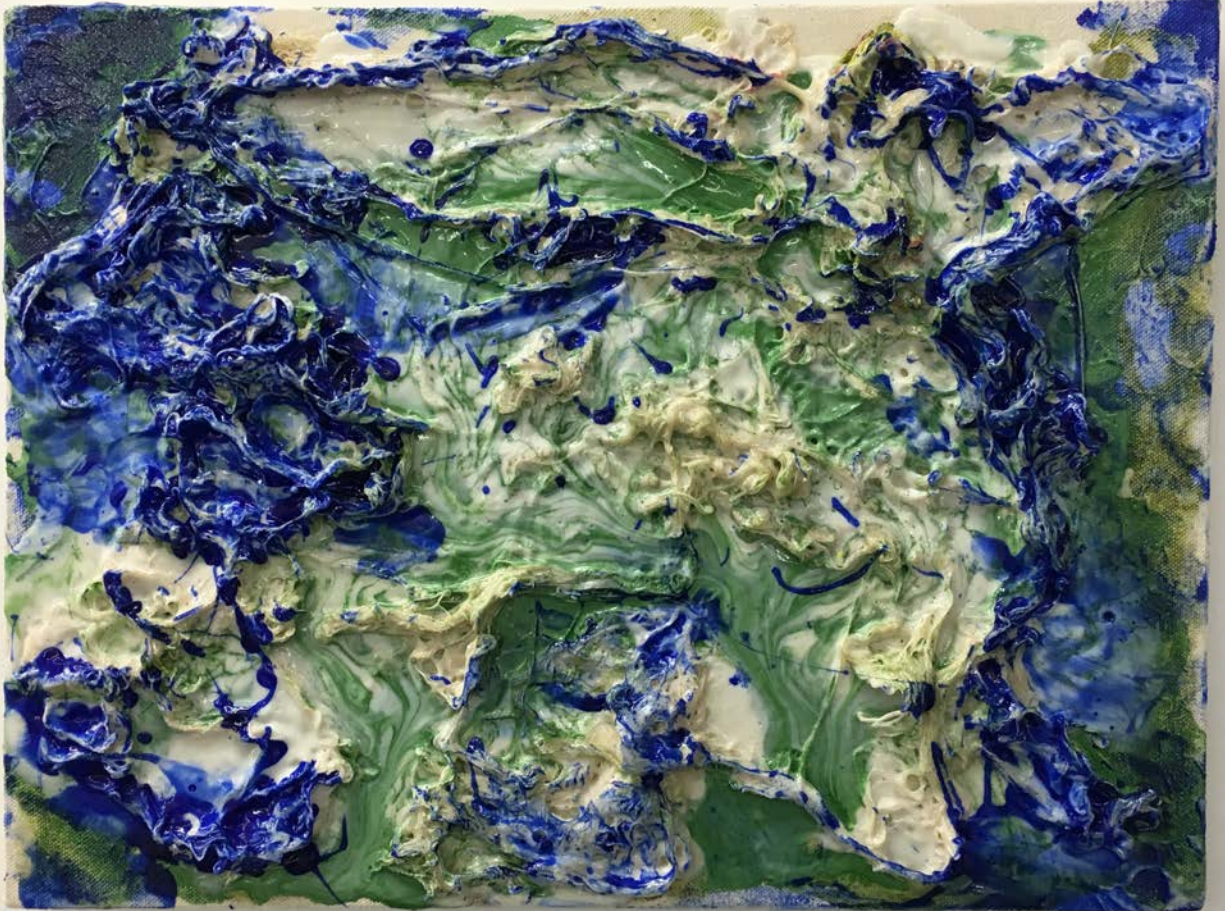
Klee's "inventiveness" includes pictorial transpositions drawn from music — he married a pianist and played violin every morning — and from theater. Like Kandinsky, he took up a spiritual pursuit in color. He provoked amusement with wry titles for comedic depictions, often using wordplay. He made fantastical renderings of humanoid creatures, at times monstrous and goofy. He developed pictograms and symbolic forms, evoking primitive communications. Through melancholic reflection, especially in the last year of his life, he painted and drew abstracted landscapes and cubistic angels.



Carl Ostendarp, “C,” (2014), acrylic on canvas, 27 x 16 3/4 in. (click to enlarge)

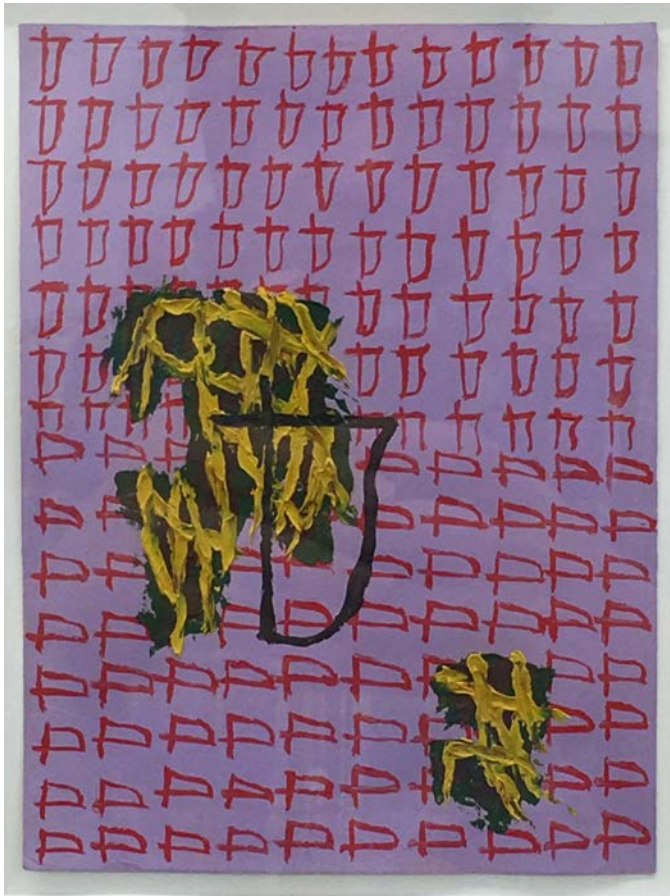
The most abstracted place in this exhibition, certainly inventive, is in Jason Saager’s “Aerial Views of Subterranean Outer Space” (2015). The almost-square painting is packed with mismatched territories, fenced fields mostly, that align only at first sight. It brings to mind TJ Clark’s observation that, for Klee, “the physical, the here and now of the painted flat rectangle” — what matters most in modern art — “is so hard for [him] to hold on to.” For Saager, the here and now, the flatness, is thrown well over the horizon. Amy Feldman’s “Vivid Limit” (2015), to the right, shares with Klee not space, but a painterly wit. The 24-inch square work continues her newer ventures into quirky humor with her signature grey stokes that zigzag and loop into a funny whole.

Carl Ostendarp has said, “Somehow music has this quality of keeping us in the present tense.” His show titles have included lyrics from the Talking Heads and the Velvet Underground, and he plays vinyl records while painting. The graphical qualities in his work on view, “C” (2014), at just over two feet tall, refashion the Roman letter into a cruder prehistoric shape, a Klee-like sign. Whereas Brenda Goodman, who currently has a piece in John Yau’s *Painting is Not Doomed to Repeat Itself* at Hollis Taggart, creates formal and symbolic charms in “Untitled (A-15)” (2009). Tablature serves as an impetus into geometric abstraction framed by long lumpy shapes that, all together, could be a book on a music stand. Perhaps Klee could sit before it with his violin.



Dona Nelson, "Small Animal Painting," (2014), acrylic and acrylic medium on canvas, 12 x 16 in.

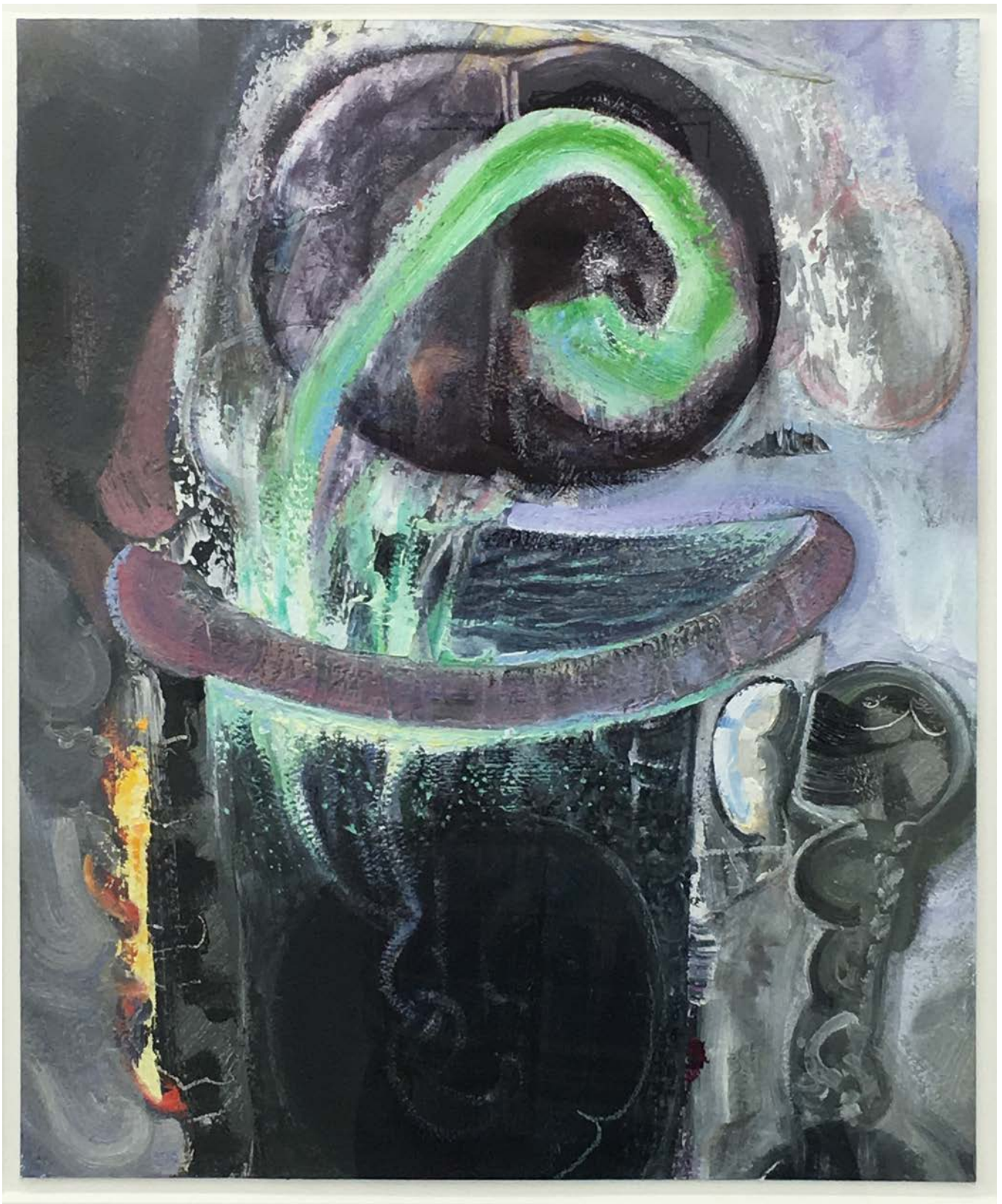
"An active line on a walk, moving freely, without goal. A walk for walk's sake." This is how Paul Klee opens his discourse on drawing in his *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, a textbook produced for students at the Bauhaus, edited by Walter Gropius and designed by László Moholy-Nagy. If "line" were changed to "paint" or "string and paint" in that particular text, Donna Nelson's "Small Animal Painting" (2014) could be its illustration. In her characteristic tumult, Nelson stirs and steers blue and green acrylic paint, string, and pure acrylic medium all over the smallest canvas I've seen of hers. Perhaps more swim than walk, here.



Jonathan Lasker, "Untitled" (1987), oil on paper, 6 3/4 x 5 in. (click to enlarge)

Nearby is Jonathan Lasker's "Untitled" (1987), which, the size of a hand, has a new context for his signature pattern making, giving the piece a more playful appearance than his larger paintings have, and feeling more symbolic. Through imagination and introspection, Brian Wood's "Phos" (2015) wills primordial forms into existence. This work is certainly close to Klee's heart — at least the one in the more transcendental realms. Sanford Wurmfeld's "CYMK Series 0" (2010–11), transparent acrylic on paper fashioned with two stacked blocks of made of nine squares each, methodically plots scales of color, saturation, and tone, like a tightened version of Klee's "Ancient Harmony" (1925).

While irony, or at least a sour side of it, is on the outs these days, Klee's version is charming. As Clement Geenberg wrote without praise, "For notice that Klee's irony is never bitter." The art is complex, too much so for the Nazis; as one news writer complained, "He paints ever more madly, he bluffs and bewilders." These keen observations of the artist's work are what recommend it now as worth more attention, and, likewise, what makes *Paul Klee* in tune with our time.



Brian Wood, "Phos" (2015), acrylic and oil on paper, 17 x 14 in.

**Paul Klee** continues at Underdonk (1329 Willoughby Ave, #211, Brooklyn) through November 1.

**Paul KleeUnderdonk**