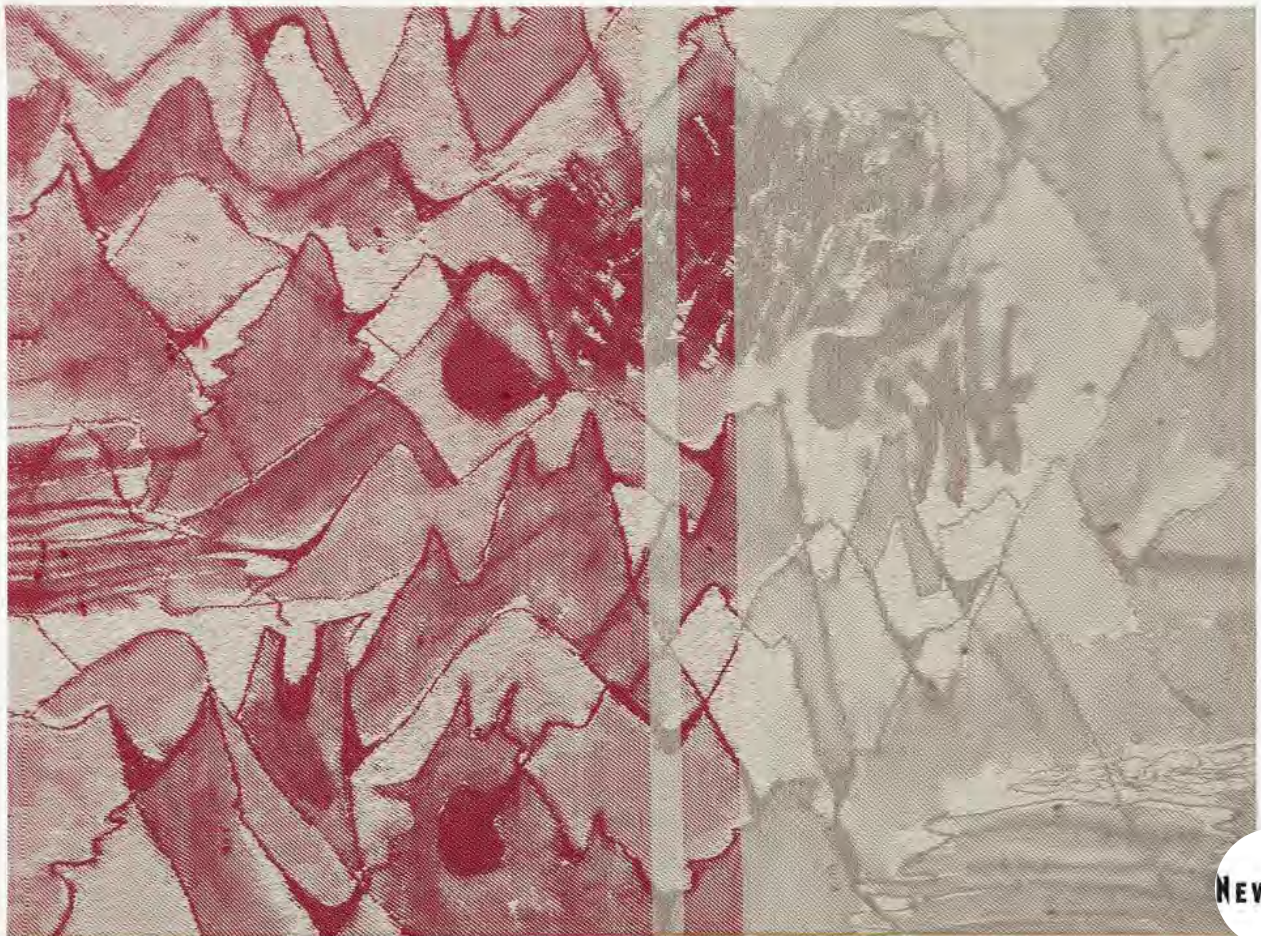


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Visual Art Culture of Chicago and Beyond

Freedom in Abstraction: A Review of “Friendship’s Death” at Andrew Rafacz

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Melissa Leandro “San Isidro, CR” Jacquard woven cloth, 2019, 51 x 38 inches/Courtesy of the gallery

In Peter Wollen's 1987 feature film "Friendship's Death," an android named Friendship falls to Earth and lands in 1970s Jordan after something goes awry during her galactic travel to our planet. Charged with a peace-building mission, Friendship is tasked with landing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but she instead finds herself in the throes of a violent conflict between the Jordanian army and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. After being picked up by a British journalist sympathetic to the Palestinian plight, the duo takes shelter in the journalist's hotel room. Friendship's witness of Palestinian bravery culminates in an astounding act of solidarity: she, like many Palestinian women, stays and fights against their imperial oppressors. Their fight becomes her fight. Prior to her death, Friendship leaves the journalist with a five-minute sequence of abstract visuals, a record of her time on the planet. There is no explanation of the images, they are left up to the journalist (and the audience) to decode.



Magalie Guérin "Untitled (Res 4.3)," 2019, oil on canvas on panel, 16 x 20 inches/Courtesy of the gallery

I indulge in such a lengthy description of the film from which the exhibition “Friendship’s Death,” at Andrew Rafacz Gallery, takes its name because understanding the film as a protest against imperial and colonial violence and the genocide of the Palestinian people is integral to understanding how the exhibition situates its relationship to visual abstraction. Abstraction thus becomes a means of liberation, of protest, of freedom against the strictures and bounds of looking, and the consequences of gazing, naming and classifying.



Leslie Baum/Courtesy of the gallery

Featuring work by Melanie Authier, Leslie Baum, Judy Dolnick, Magalie Guérin and Melissa Leandro, the show also does not shy from the frictions of visual abstraction. The work of each artist, alongside the thoughtfulness of each curatorial gesture, gives weight to the opacity of mark-making alongside the practice's multivalent freedom. Such resistance, its ability to chafe and bruise, falls in line with the importance abstraction places on the visual plane. This isn't necessarily an instance of visual perception's dominance, but rather a reminder that it takes work to be here, to really look, to understand, to feel what another feels.



Judy Dolnick, "Untitled (158)" 1986/Courtesy of the gallery



Melanie Authier, "Museum of the Wind"/Courtesy of the gallery

Each artist's visual vocabulary explores the potential of color, shape, texture, space and time. Though all use the two-dimensional picture plane, Melissa

Leandro's stitched and woven cloth pieces expand both the tactility of the plane and its interior geography. Whorls and bumps of thread mimic the coils of knotty acrylic bloomed splashes in pieces like Judy Dolnick's "Untitled (158)" from 1986 and Melanie Authier's 2023 "Dream Machine." Hanging alongside Dolnick and Authier are works by Leslie Baum and Magalie Guérin, both artists who share an inward-turned gaze. Both of their practices challenge and grate against their own supple boundaries, while shapes and lines distort and change. Through manipulating time and movement, Baum and Guérin transform the minutiae of the day into something much deeper and stranger than one ever thought possible.

Like the character of Friendship states in Wollen's film, "strange music" abounds in this life. It's music that's also beautiful and weaves throughout each piece in the exhibition. Come see and hear for yourself.

"Friendship's Death" at Andrew Rafacz, 1749 West Chicago, on view through July 15.