

Solar, Solaris & Lunar: Three Painting Series by Morela Avilán

Men should take their knowledge from the Sun, the Moon and the Stars.
Ralph Waldo Emerson

*When an artist begins a new series of work, it is always a kind of adventure
—like an archeological dig where hidden treasures are unearthed
through persistent exploration.*
Ingrid Evans

With her three continuing series, *Solar*, *Solaris* (Latin: pertaining to the sun), and *Lunar*, Morela Avilán is deeply immersed in investigating a topic that has long captivated imaginative people across the globe — artistic suggestions of the celestial bodies occupying the earth's solar system and the light that emanates from them.

Communicators from Egyptian, Anasazi, Aztec and other ancient cultures portrayed these orbs utilizing varying techniques on an array of materials and for an assortment of purposes. During the Middle Ages, attention turned not to depictions of the heavenly spheres themselves but to the light they emit: Romanesque architects built churches that were oriented to capture shafts of light which were directed at illuminating important Biblical stories carved onto column capitals. Centuries later, the High Renaissance artist Raphael, in a work now known as the Mond Crucifixion, imagined the cosmos with both a sun and a moon as personified faces. Much more recently, modernist artists have explored the topic — Edvard Munch's turn-of-the-century mural at Oslo University, *The Sun*, being a prime example. Arthur Dove's 1937 painting *Me and the Moon* represents the lunar sphere in a mystical two-dimensionality. In the mid-1970s, Nancy Holt installed her *Sun Tunnels* in Utah's Great Basin, four concrete cylinders aligned to frame the sun on the horizon during the summer and winter solstices. A number of Avilán's fellow contemporary artists have researched the topic as well. Consider, for example, Olafur

Eliasson's *The Weather Project*, a 2003 installation in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall which displayed a massive orange light disc as the sun. James Turrell has constructed dozens of *Skyspaces* at institutions across the Northern Hemisphere which, when entered, direct the viewer to observe in quiet contemplation celestial action and, importantly, the qualities of changing light associated with the passage of time. In 2005, Dale Chihuly installed his gigantic *Sun*, a conglomerate mass of disparate pieces of yellow-to-orange blown glass forms, at Kew Gardens in London.

Morela Avilán carries on this cosmic investigation via painting, utilizing the centuries-old tradition of applying paint to a two-dimensional surface, in her case canvas. In all three of her series, the works are usually circular (*tondos*) that range in size from 12 to 46 inches in diameter. But some works, the earliest, in the *Solar* series, are rectangular. No works in any of the three series are three-dimensional in the spherical sense.

In all three series, Avilán applies paint to the surface in deliberate dabs and daubs, a method not dissimilar to the paint application systems used by continental turn-of-the-century post-Impressionist artists — George Seurat and Paul Signac to name just two — and adopted as a technique by many afterwards including the early 20th Century American Maurice Prendergast and more contemporarily, the Californian David Hollowell, affectionately known to his friends and colleagues as “Dot Man.” Like these artists, there is little spontaneity in Avilán's paint application; each action is well-considered leading to a balanced pattern and a unified whole. It would be unsurprising to learn that Avilán has studied in depth the work of the French psychologists and philosophers who wrote extensively on color theory in the late 1800s, particularly paying attention to what colors, when placed in close proximity to one another, reveal what effects to various receivers.

The artist's application of paint in all three series leaves many works with a finished surface that has significant relief, a heavy impasto. Interestingly, as each series progresses, particularly in the *Solaris* and *Lunar* series, there is less dependence on individual dabs and daubs and more attention paid to unifying the whole, resulting in entire fields of similar color, sometimes being the entire painting as in *Solaris IX* or *Solaris X*.

Most of the works the *Solar* series have a primarily lighter-hued field with darker-hued colors applied on top, for example, *Solar XVIII* or *Solar XIX*. But not always. A few of the paintings in the series are the opposite: They have a primarily darker-hued field with lighter-hued colors superimposed, as in *Solar XXII*. On occasion, both these effects happen within the same painting, *Solar XXIV*, for example. In the *Solaris* series, an explanation of the colors applied becomes more complicated; while some works have highly distinct daubs owing to surrounding contrasting color choices—*Blue Solaris*, *Magenta Solaris*, and *Green Solaris* for example—in others the complementary color choices are more closely aligned, occasionally blended together, and when combined with a less articulated manner of applying paint, leads to a sensation where the previously-highlighted individual marks becomes subservient to the whole, the entire color field, as in *Solaris VII*, *Solaris IX*, and *Solaris X*. In the *Lunar* series, a similar observation can be made. *Lunar 1*, *Lunar 2*, and *Lunar 3* have distinct daubs: As the series progresses, the application of paint becomes less pointillist and more smooth, more blended, less featureless, and perhaps more mystical, like *Lunar 6* and *Lunar 8*. These *Lunar* works could also be described as being more observational: It's easy to imagine from viewing these paintings that Avilán has spent long hours observing the surface of the moon, an activity impossible to do regarding the sun, thus leading to a different kind of painting. In some examples in the *Solar* and *Solaris* portfolios, Avilán's choice of color and application of paint has created the illusion that there are paths, or perhaps webs, leading through the stacked dots such as in *Solar XX*, *Solar XXIII*, *Solar XXIV*, or in *Solaris IV*.

Like both the ancient communicators and abundant visual artists through the ages, Morela Avilán has been inspired by the cosmos for subject matter in her art. Her exploration of light and its sources in her *Solar*, *Solaris*, and *Lunar* series demonstrates her laser-like focus on two of the heavenly orbs in our solar system. We earthlings are much richer for her ongoing painterly contributions that enhance our appreciation of these all-important spheres.

Jim Peele
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