

# GAYLEN GERBER

IN NEUTRAL

KATHRYN HIXSON



UNTITLED.  
OIL ON CANVAS, 38 X 38," COURTESY ROBBIN LOCKETT GALLERY.

**Kathryn Hixson:** *Your work from a number of years ago seemed cynical. It seemed tied into an endgame strategy. The grey paintings projected a feeling that the period when art could make a difference was over, finished. The paintings were all the same, and posited no notion of social, moral, or political intention. They were nothing.*

**Gaylen Gerber:** That's true.

**KH:** Still?

**GG:** Yes, I'd like to say that it is still true, but I don't consider the lack of political, ethical, or social intentions as useless or negative.

**KH:** Why not?

**GG:** For me, what started as negation—an acceptance of the lack of significance to everything—came to simultaneously

include its contradiction—an acceptance of significance to everything.

**KH:** *Is there a lack of value?*

**GG:** It's more an ambivalence that's representative of a middle ground where extremes cannot maintain an uncompromising position. In the work, it's a move towards a lack of differentiation and it is the perception of this in itself that may be an achievement. It seems to me to be more useful for the work to accept the values applied to it without confirmation or denial. It seems to me to be less useful to reveal my values.

**KH:** *So the work could support any number of interpretations. Could this include a spiritual or transcendental interpretation?*

**GG:** If the work is in some degree about acceptance, or about the impossibility of

exclusion. The result is a paradox; seen negatively this would include the positive, seen positively this would include the negative, seen factually this would include the transcendent. In this way I am willing to accept the inclusion of the spiritual or transcendent.

**KH:** *Does the work strive for transcendence?*

**GG:** For some, I don't think it can be forced or secured. Personal significance seems transitory, effected by both past as well as present experience. Significance can be brought to the work by the viewer and located there, and it remains "legitimate" for as long as it has resonance within that viewer, but once that resonance is gone from the viewer it is gone from the work as well. This happens regardless of my involvement.



INSTALLATION VIEW.  
ROBBIN LOCKETT GALLERY, CHICAGO, 1989

**KH:** *So you prefer not to take a position?*

**GG:** Partly. It is in keeping with how I think we locate significance, and how that significance might be communicated. It suggests that to insist on a given conclusion, even a general one, is a misdirected desire. This shouldn't be mistaken for apathy, which I've expressed an interest in, in the past.

**KH:** *It seems possible that one could succeed in communicating certain ideas or points of view to an audience that previously has shared similar views and history.*

**GG:** I think you're accurate in what you say, but I think that this is more of an agreement than an understanding.

**KH:** *Like an agreed upon use of a system? Which is always plagued by ambiguities and uncertainties?*

**GG:** Yes, I've tried to incorporate ambiguity and paradox, because for me they imply a need, or at least a questioning of what we believe. The result of this incorporation of contradiction was that my previously held conception of what constituted success and failure seemed irrelevant. Things became more or less useful or useless, but not much more, with the result that a lack of continuity was no longer a difficulty.

**KH:** *Isn't there individual responsibility for determining personal values outside of social or cultural agreement?*

**GG:** Responsibility here seems individual. For me, what we come to believe is based on our perception of what we know. That this cannot be verified and is constantly under revision should be factored into consideration. You might draw a parallel to this instability in the temporal aspect in the

work, in which the physical relationship of the viewer to the work determines what he or she believes the work to be.

**KH:** *Your installations are repetitious of earlier shows, but are not duplications. Fluctuations of perception, over time, question how we gather information and form belief. Is memory used to reconstruct this process?*

**GG:** Well, while it seems to me that experience is constant, unbroken, our perception of it fluctuates, and this helps to define our tendency to draw conclusions even as information is accumulating. It put familiarity in jeopardy, if only between canvases.

**KH:** *This is a slow down in perception, a suspension of judgement.*

**GG:** My feeling is that perception doesn't slow down but perhaps the conclusions that we draw are suspended briefly. I've attempted to include ideas that seem exclusive of each other or are contradictory. I don't think of these as simple pairings of opposites. This paradox seems both at ease and without loss of autonomy.

**KH:** *Does the lack of conflict you see in this contradiction of apparently opposing ideas or functions translate into the use of a greatly expanded subject pool—of contradictory images or sentiments—in the drawings?*

**GG:** Yes, in that in both bodies of work, it's difficult to "know" them, to secure them in the memory. They both use the systematic to help define themselves. Systems, for me, make it initially more apparent that in defining themselves they also define their exception. I enjoy the ideas of function and structure, and there is a fascination for me in working with systems. I am in agreement

with a view of the world that's inclusive. With the drawings in particular, I'm interested in and see the specifics of the ordinary and its implication to suggest that there must be some sense that can be attached to objects and actions because of their concrete nature. The notion of a larger understanding still has considerable draw, even though I think it's been successfully disputed.

**KH:** *How does your own objectivity or subjectivity relate to the work?*

**GG:** It's the problem and the solution. It seems an obvious falsehood to believe that you can be objective, or independent of the self, and yet if you accept that, it follows that it is also a falsehood to think that you can be exclusively subjective. I think it's likely that we can be and are both but neither exclusively. I've tried to acknowledge this, to not reinforce one perception but to acknowledge many.

**KH:** *Your work is done by hand, the paintings are oil on canvas, easel size, the drawings are graphite on paper, each work completed singly. This is very traditional.*

**GG:** Very specific. In part, it is a repetition of convention.

**KH:** *Is the production labor intensive?*

**GG:** The paintings go quickly, four days. I've read Alex Katz comparing the process of painting to a performance of music. The idea is that you know the score, how much time the piece should take, about how fast or slow things should go, and usually the performance falls within certain parameters. I like this a lot but for me it's more like playing a record.

*Kathryn Hixson is a critic living in Chicago.*