SKOTO GALLERY 529 West 20th Street, 5FL.
New York, NY 10011 212-352 8058
info@skotogallery.com www.skotogallery.com



Lula Mae Blocton-Circles of Joyful Pride, 2025, oil on canvas, 60x60 inches

Lula Mae Blocton
Colors and Mirrors of Equality
October 29, 2026 – January 30, 2027

Skoto Gallery is pleased to present “Colors and Mirrors of Equality”, an exhibition of recent work by the African American artist Lula Mae Blocton. This will be her third solo exhibition at the gallery curated by Barbara Stehle. **The opening reception will be held on Thursday, October 29, 6-8pm**, the artist will be present.

This exhibition gathers works on paper and canvases, of different sizes and periods of the artist’s life, from a couple of decades ago to the latest series currently on show at the Aldrich Museum. Within this diversity, the exhibition highlights Lula Mae Blocton’s artistic preoccupations and her quest for an abstract language to express Queer and African American pride. While preparing the exhibition, the artist and the curator engaged in a conversation about the works in the show and the path Blocton took in the arts. Nothing seemed better fitted to introduce the exhibition. Here is a transcript:

Lula Mae Blocton and Barbara Stehle, conversation October 14th and 15th 2026.

Barbara Stehle: The paintings in the show feature a lot of zig zags, triangles, squares, circles, geometry is all over!

Lula Mae Blocton: Ah! Yes, that is true, but in fact, it looks geometrical, but it is intuitive. A lot of the shapes are not properly mathematical; it is more like a make belief geometry. As I have gotten older, I have gotten bad at math, I was never good to start with! If anybody looked closely, they would realize these lines are not parallel really, they work for me but are not geometrically accurate. Mostly, they give the idea of geometrical harmony and that is what I am looking for.

B: Can you speak of the role of symmetry in your work.

L: I always love mirror images. In the drawing sketches you show in the exhibition, the symmetry reflects to patterns from African textiles, and it is something that I developed with time and intuition.

B: Mirroring and equality: Repeating the form but changing the color tone, being different but equal. I can't help but see a symbol in that.

L: Leonardo (da Vinci) wrote all his diaries in mirror images, and I was really amazed by that. Mirror imaging has a mystery to it. In my own work, I love the way symmetry looks and the creative satisfaction it gives me. The paintings design feels complete and whole. I try to maintain that solidity even with the paintings that don't include mirror images.

B: What about the circle? It is perfectly symmetrical in shape, and it is at the center of the newest paintings.

L: I had never in my life painted a circle. I just did it very recently. I started looking at Alma Thomas, and her use of circles. She was close to Kenneth Noland and other artists who used concentric circles. So, I challenged myself with the circle. I made four or five and I found something different in each one! That amazed me! None of them make the same impression. It is interesting to see the variations in colors.

B: Your circles evoke the color wheel and its multiple radius; some colors are soft and others vibrant. They keep switching. They appear all related but are nothing like each other! It is like siblings, I guess.

L: Yes! The herding is so very different from the others. That is what was exciting, to see their differences. They all are hand drawn circles and that was difficult to do, to get that feeling of the circle. I had no idea what these paintings would look like. I wanted to get away from angles. From the very beginning I wanted to create concentric circles. The question was to center or not center the concentric circles. Alma Thomas did a series of circles, but they were not centered in the middle of the canvas. Mine are not either.

B: They look like they are.

L: That illusionary geometry I work with! I could not center them, but they are centered enough that you do feel the movement. I wanted to stay away from creating targets. The contrast of colors can make it feel like a target. Alma Thomas's edges are not sharp and crisp, but you feel the circles. She adapted the concentric circle to her style. I love the idea that circles are used for healing, they are symbols of life. I think about their meaning. They are connected to spirituality, to the idea of the universe and the planets, the circle has all sorts of connotations to it.

B: Circles are unity too.

L: Yes, absolutely.

B: You know Lula, if you are not good at geometry, why did you choose to make it such an important part of your work?

L: Laughs--- I am not sure how that came about. Well, it started early on. In the 1970s I lived in New York City, I grew up in the Midwest, and I had never lived in a city that had been laid out in such a specific way. The experience of the city involved dealing with shapes and forms that had been designed with a ninety-degree angle. It was so novel to me, I kept on observing it and I thought that using the grid would be a great way to distribute color in a painting, without having to use perspective. The idea was that the shapes would be flat and parallel to the edges of the canvas at ninety degrees. I wanted that frontality. It was the perfect vehicle for me to eliminate any perspective and deal with the color and not worry about creating the illusion of space. Whatever illusion happens, it happens because of the colors and how they overlap with each other. I love linear perspective, but it is a system and I did not want to be tied to that system. I wanted the colors themselves to create the illusion of space.

B: How did you start?

L: I started with some drawings. I experimented on toned paper, because the paper itself would bring in tones and values that would affect the color pencil. I would use the color of the pencil combined with the color of the paper. With oil paint it is very hard to transform a color, to make it change from a light hue to a dark one on the white surface of the canvas. From the toned papers, I got the idea of toning the canvas first. When preparing the canvas, I would use grey gesso instead of a white gesso. I started thinking of the bottom layer of these images. The diagonals came up because of the light and dark equal tonalities. In 1999, I decided to start to make paintings with equal ground areas of black and white. I wanted art to reflect the fact that I have always believed in people being equal and being regarded as equal. We are all humans except that our covers are all a bit different, of different hues. When people talk about racism and politics, they reduce it to black and white. A lot of people associate colors to race and attribute a negative connotation to black. When I started painting as a young person, I was not sure what I wanted to say, but as I matured, it became important for me to speak about equality. It was really a political decision I made because of the state of the world. To divide the canvas equally there is only about 4 or 5 ways to do it using geometry. I decided to use diagonal. It is easy for me to use them. But again, I don't use proper mathematics. Lately, for the circle paintings at the Aldrich, I have changed the shape of the black and white grounds. They are not based on the same diagonal patterns anymore. I don't even think that they are mathematically equal, but they look equal.

B: You always put perception before math.

L: Absolutely, I really enjoy working in a way that lets perception lead me. I have been able to develop my skills. I love the idea of mixing colors to create a dark yellow that looks brighter on a dark surface. I use color mixing and glaze transparency to achieve the right perceived tonality. I love the magic of transparencies that create new colors. I get excited when you look at a transparency and you can't name anymore which color it is. You can see the colors, but they are not easy to identify. Their perceived colors are different from the ones on my palette. These changes are what I find so fun. I love taking a green and making it look pink or make it look red. It has to do with color relationships. If you have a green band that goes across the painting and I want to change it to blue and violet, I can do it by changing what goes next to it.

B: When did you develop that passion for color relations?

L: When I went to grad school in 1969-70, my world was upside down with all that went on in politics. I was a bit lost. I was not sure if I wanted to be a figurative or abstract artist. Then I discovered the Josef Albers book "Interaction of Color" with the silkscreen plates in it. It was at the Indiana University library,

and you could not take it out, it was an expensive book. I went to the library to play with the plates, move them around, place them next to each other. I trained myself with the book. Albers also had a study of transparencies, and you could move the forms spatially. You could make space by just changing the saturation of color. I was exciting and it helped me decide where I wanted to go with my art.

B: In this show there is a homage to Alma Thomas, and the other homage you have is to Josef Albers.

L: Yes, because whenever you use a square shape within a square shape you are reminded of whoever did it first and that was Albers. And he was so important to me for colors as I said.

B: Every artist has colors that stand out in their palette, and you think, oh that is a Matisse pink, or a Matisse green. For me, the Lula Mae Blocton colors are pinks and browns ... Golden yellows too. Like the ones in your color design drawings.

L: The drawings you showed me are the colors of the extended Pride flag: six colors are used for the flag. The pride flag was only six colors to start with, and I used that in everything I made: Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet. And it is interesting because these are the colors of the rainbow. Going back to physics, if you direct white light through a prism that is what you get. Rainbow is refracted light. About ten years ago, they added five more colors to the Pride flag.

B: Which ones?

L: White, pink, blue, light brown and dark brown or black you could say. And now the flag has even more colors, to include everyone. It represents gays, transgender, non-binary, people of color etc. My later paintings are getting more complicated with eleven colors to figure out now. I was in the closet for so long, I felt I engaged with Black identity before I did with my Queer identity.

B: The Pride flag took the colors of the rainbow in 1978. You start using the rainbow colors in 1972, so you were ahead.

L: Are you sure?

B: Yes, I am!

L: I guess you're right… I made these cubes in 1972 with the rainbow palette. See, these were the colors I radiated toward. I was not necessarily thinking about Pride consciously, but there it is. I remember being influenced by the physics of color. I was really interested in transparencies, the prism of light. Then, I went to an exhibition where I saw a rainbow painted through the landscape. I can't remember where that was or who the painter was. I looked carefully, the artist had not glazed the colors over, the artist actually mixed each individual color that went over the shape. This is exactly the way I started my own transparencies; the colors were not on the surface; they became a part of the images. Each of the individual colors was mixed with each of the color that it changed. And it is still true to this day.

B: I think your paintings came out before you.

L: Really? You think so? That would be interesting, isn't it? I did not come out to my family officially until I introduced them to Shirley. We were living together in New York, and they came to visit, so there it was. No further explanation. It must have been 1972 or 73, I can't remember exactly. We were there in New York for the first Pride parade.

B: I think your early New York paintings of the 1970s revealed your true colors. You weren't consciously making a political statement; you were simply being yourself. You had found your community and felt free to be yourself. The rainbow colors expressed your light and joy. Beyond studying the prism of light, you

were revealing your inner light. To me, the light spectrum and your queer identity became intertwined, both expressed in your art.

L: Laughs- I guess so, I was so used to being secretive. But the dates of my coming out in life and in art coincide. Interesting. Laughs.

B: And what about Africa? When did you go? The African patterns look so empowering in the new works.

L: I went to Africa in 1999. We went to Kenya and Tanzania. And when we came back, I made a conscious effort to look for different patterns, it started with Kente and Malian patterns. I remember going to the Detroit Wright museum and they had a beautiful display of Kente cloth. I also found this amazing book on African patterns from different regions and tribes. It fascinated me, so I started using the patterns I found in it. And that is how it started. I just assumed since my family were sharecroppers in Alabama-- even though my mother used to tell us we also had American Indian blood-- I just assumed that my parent's ancestors came from Africa some time ago. In the paintings, the African patterns are in the background, you see them through the colors, they relate to my roots.

I remember going to visit my grandparents in the South. We spent most of our time at my grandmother's on my mother's side. My grandmother used to make quilts, and I don't know if they knew of or are related to the Gee's Bend Quiltmakers of Selma, but my folks were from 10 or 12 miles South of Selma, they were from Tyler. They made quilts off season, during the winter. This is one of the few things I remember so clearly about going South: These patchworks. They were made of seed bags, old fabrics, shirts, and pants. And that would have been what we had to keep warm.

B: This experience of your childhood stayed with you. It had to have influenced you.

L: I looked up references about the grid the other day and with the word came textile.

B: There you go! Do you remember the colors of your grandmother's quilts?

L: Her quilts were utilitarian type objects; they were not elegant. There were so many different patterns sewn together. I remember how looking closely you could recognize an old shirt and other things. It was really cool to be warmed up by something you could visually look at and make out shapes from different things.

B: Same in your paintings! You have shapes one can recognize too: Animals, masks, stools, etc..

L: Absolutely. The book's title is "African design from traditional sources". These are designs that come from all different sources. They can be headdress, chairs, doors, gold weights, shields, and different countries. Utilitarian types of objects.

B: So, you did not fall off so far from these quilts Lula! Somehow, you are doing something that is not that different...

L: Uh, uh; That is really something. Laughs. You know, I think I do have somewhere still one of my grandmother's quilts. I am going to look for it.