

# ARTFORUM

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## Xylor Jane

UNIVERSITY MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Xylor Jane's paintings are composed of delicate grids of Arabic numerals, each obediently stabled in its own square. The digits are not quivering in the air or bolting through cables or scurrying behind images. They are firm, settled. With their seemingly mechanical precision, the paintings can recall stock-ticker displays or sheets of raw data. But there are



Xylor Jane, *Magic Square for Finding Lost People*, 2014, oil on panel, 24 x 24".

traces of the artist's hand everywhere. All of the cells are lovingly stippled with dots—their soft-serve tips indexing the paintbrush's release—and smudges are left in plain sight on the sides of every canvas. Jane dotes on the numbers, cossets them—even calls them “friends and family”—such that their cold, abstract, and repeatable nature is rendered material, tender, and human.

Together, Jane's paintings propose a system of numerology that's just as multitone as any language. Sometimes the numbers are calendrical: A set of primes in 13831, 2007, corresponds to 7,818 days, or “almost 22 years,” as the wall label notes. Elsewhere, they form scores or prompts: The label for *Nox Rex # 22 (Puff)*, 2012, a pale canvas of stamp-size numbers, reads, “Dear Musicians, Please compose a song for Sophie Germain” (an eighteenth-century French mathematician). And occasionally, they purport to be keys: In *Magic Square for Finding Lost People*, 2014, nine numbers on a Technicolor background suggest a mystical code.

The wall labels, written by the artist, tend to disperse meaning as quickly as they gather it. They do not explain or elucidate the paintings but confuse and texture them. We are left to imagine that there is some occult correspondence between the numbers, or between the numbers and the world—Jane’s work flirts with the Pythagorean conceit that numbers are the ultimate bearers of truth—but whatever latent significance there is (or is not) remains stiffly elusive, illegible. Watching someone parse these numbers would be as oddly comforting as seeing someone read dead languages off papyrus, or type lines of computer code.

Jane’s abstractions have an affinity to Op art. They are geometric, allover, intricate, and liable to flicker and move. But the comparison is misleading. Most of Jane’s work twins language and math—it suggests systems that can be read, understood, or solved—and this is foreign to the strictly optical tricks of, say, Victor Vasarely or Bridget Riley, or even Tauba Auerbach, a contemporary. Auerbach’s abstractions are mathy, but they are reserved, self-contained; Jane’s, by contrast, reach out and communicate. One 2009 work is titled *Via Crucis IV (Hi Mom)*.

The warmth of the paintings also comes from their palette (glitter paints, friendly pinks, and pastel blues) and shapes: Hard-edge polygons, especially triangles and squares, are everywhere offset by gentle disks, dots, and bending lines. In *Election Party (For Perfect Numbers 6 & 28)*, 2017, sparkling hearts swell out toward the edge of the canvas against expanding fields of green- and gold-tinted squares. In *Magic Square for Earthlings*, 2017, toothy rows of sunset-colored triangles are fitted with a countercurrent of rainbow-colored dots. *For perfect numbers, for earthlings*—these paintings are not only technical exercises in form but heartfelt devotional offerings.

In Jane’s work, we can experience fantasy crashing against its own limits. The painted matrices first arouse the viewer’s ultimate desire (and fallacy): that with the right interpretive lens, we will unlock the hidden meaning of the work of art. But then resignation sets in—we realize we will never truly know—and the numbers begin to compute differently. What was once cruel about their precision, or enticing about their utility, becomes something else: a kind of benevolence.

—Zachary Fine