ELLEN BANKS

Boston University College of Fine Arts
School of Visual Arts
Sherman Gallery at Boston University
Sherman Gallery at Boston University

MUSICAL MANIFESTATIONS:
ELLEN BANKS

COMPOSITIONS IN WAX, PAPER, AND YARN

September 13–October 30, 2011

Exhibition and Catalog by
Kenneth Hartvigsen

Boston University College of Fine Arts
School of Visual Arts
Sherman Gallery at Boston University
The School of Visual Arts (SVA) at the College of Fine Arts (CFA) is pleased to present an exhibition of work by the esteemed artist Ellen Banks. Although Banks has enjoyed an enviable international career and currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York, she has a noteworthy Boston connection: she taught at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts from 1974 to 1996. In the past three decades, Banks has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions throughout Europe and the United States, yet a significant show of her work in Boston was last held at the New England School of Art in 1997. It is therefore an honor and a tremendous opportunity to present Ellen Banks—Musical Manifestations: Compositions in Wax, Paper, and Yarn, curated by Kenneth Hartvigsen, Jan and Warren Adelson Fellow in American Art in the Department of History of Art & Architecture at Boston University. As the show’s title illuminates, the exhibition explores Banks’s ongoing interest in visual interpretation of the musical score through a selection of the artist’s recent work in diverse media.

This exhibition would not be possible without the support and contribution of many individuals. I would like to first thank Ellen Banks for her wholehearted participation, and Kenneth Hartvigsen for his thoughtful curation and critical insight. The exhibition is a direct result of their fruitful collaboration and dialog.

I would like to acknowledge the Jan and Warren Adelson Fund for supporting, in part, the exhibition and catalog. I also express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to Patricia Hills, Professor of American Art, Department of History of Art & Architecture at Boston University, for her always-diligent oversight.

At the College of Fine Arts, I would like to sincerely thank Dean Benjamín E. Juárez and At Boston University’s Creative Services. I thank Hy Zhitnik for the catalog design, Temple Goodhue for her careful editing, and Jan Hauben for her always-diligent management of the publication’s production. Additional thanks to Lou Rouse for his photography for this catalog. Ellen Banks is represented by Andre Zarre Gallery in New York City and Galerie Spandau in Berlin.

Lynne Cooney
Exhibitions Director, School of Visual Arts

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ELLEN BANKS—
MUSICAL MANIFESTATIONS:
COMPOSITIONS IN WAX,
PAPER, AND YARN
KENNETH HARTVIGSEN

IN 1981, ELLEN BANKS COMPLETED WHAT SHE HAS CALLED HER FIRST SUCCESSFUL MUSIC PAINTING. It was a personal breakthrough, and gradually she began working exclusively from musical scores, transforming the formal elements of sheet music into textured artworks using wax, paper, and yarn. She reads music and grew up playing the piano, which accounts for the fact that her chosen sources are all printed piano scores. Yet the actual songs and sounds are not really Banks’s central concern. Rather, it is the notations, the physical signs for sound, that provide the basis for her colorful abstractions as she uses the notes from a single measure of piano music as the inspiration for each painting in wax or on paper, and each piece rendered in wool yarn.

This essay will present several interlocking keys to Banks’s work that will aid the viewer in unlocking her musical manifestations. First, though her paintings are abstractions, they must also be encountered as material embodiments of musical signs and symbols. Banks approaches musical notation as a symbolic language, an arbitrary system for encoding thoughts and sounds using visual patterns. Secondly, though she is not interested in visually describing sounds or communicating her emotional reaction to music, Banks never abandons the physicality of the basic materials—the musical score and her artistic media. Keeping this in mind illuminates significant elements of her process, including her love of improvisation and riffing in paint, wax, and fabric. Lastly, Banks does not use these symbolic systems to convey conventional messages, but rather to suggest patterns of human culture and thought. She seems to see all communication, perhaps all human action and interaction, in terms of making and recognizing patterns. As such, the repeating shapes in Banks’s work, the riffs and patterns she carves into wax or works into woolen fabric, constitute visual meditations on how humans order and understand the world. She is a sophisticated thinker who, in spite of her love of spoken languages, thinks best with her hands, working in paint and yarn.

As is evident when approaching any of the pieces in this exhibition, her work sets itself apart from other music-centered visual art through its warmth and texture, its intense focus on materiality. However, Banks was not the first artist to investigate the musical score as a permeable membrane facilitating exchange between aural and visual worlds. Rather, she is part of an ever-expanding group of artists who challenge the score from multiple angles. Musical notation, like all written languages, is a visual system, inviting experimentation from both musicians and visual artists.
In the 1950s and 1960s, some avant-garde composers such as John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Morton Feldman, Cornelius Cardew, and numerous artist/musicians associated in varying degrees with the Fluxus collective, began experimenting with what is now called graphic notation by including nontraditional and nonmusical symbols in their scores ranging from simple text instructions and annotations to elaborate drawings. The performances which resulted from these scores often blurred the boundaries between music, performance, and installation art, while the scores themselves could often be appreciated as unique visual objects. Cornelius Cardew’s 193-page graphic masterpiece Treatise (1967), for example, while primarily intended for musical performance, can also be considered “a work of graphic art” and “a graphic work whose subject matter is music.” 23 Though it bears no physical resemblance to her paintings (for all of its visual play, Treatise takes the literal form of an extended score), Banks and Cardew pursue similar questions as they investigate the meaning and form of musical symbols and focus on musical notation as a subject.

Other composers have produced scores that more directly evoke the abstract painting tradition of which Banks is part. Anthony Braxton, active as a solo saxophonist and composer since the 1960s, has long given his compositions graphic rather than written titles. These can be simple geometric shapes resembling schematic diagrams, or even colorfully illuminated maps.24 More recently, Braxton has, with his Tri-Centric Orchestra, performed what he calls “Falling River Music,” for which the score itself is a painterly abstraction accompanied by a mysterious symbolic legend. According to the orchestra’s publications: “Braxton refuses to assign any specific meanings to the notations of his Falling River scores, since part of their purpose is to allow each performer to find her own way through them.”25 In this case, visual art does not come from the score, but rather invades it, seeking for a free exploration of image and sound correlation.

Banks comes to the contested musical score from the opposite direction, not asking how graphic arts can expand written musical language to convey musical sounds, but rather asserting that the linguistic system of the score offers dynamic optical expressions of balance and tension, and that focused looking at conventional sheet music and not only graphic notation can lead to meaningful visual experiences. Though her process and style are unique, Banks is not alone in this quest. A recent exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Contemporary Outlook: Seeing Songs, (July 1, 2009–February 21, 2010), included multiple interpretations of sheet music including Idris Khan’s Wagner… Parsifal (2007), for which the artist created a single-singlet sheet print by superimposing each page of the indicated score on top of another. The resulting work has a murky appearance as the hundreds of layers of staff and bar lines create a dense thickets-like grid within which masses of black note heads sweep in ghostly arcs. Where Khan works in the macro, Banks focuses on the micro, looking for small moments of balance, movement, and whimsy in a song’s individual measures. Addressing her process, Banks wittily calls herself a representational artist of abstract forms. This playful pronouncement is typical of her approach to art. In conversation, she often laughs when explaining her work, not because she doesn’t take art seriously but rather because she finds it so tremendously entertaining. She graciously accepts thoughtful reflections on her paintings and happily engages with others in serious discussions about art’s meanings and functions. However, she is far more moved by the immediate emotional or aesthetic reaction to the end result of her work, by the viewer who is simply in tune with a painting’s beauty or joyful character. Yet, she is correct that her art represents as much as it abstracts, though it represents forms not from the natural world but taken from the communicative signs that underpin human culture and civilization. Banks begins not with an object but with a sign, with the signifier not the signified. She explores this abstract representational system of musical notation, seeing its patterns and gridded staff as a skeleton to be clothed in fleshly colors and fibers.

Alongside music, physicality is the second key to experiencing Banks’s work. Each of her pieces must first be experienced as a physical object, not merely a visual representation. Starting from the abstract, Banks creates paintings of tremendous physical presence, of visual and tactile depth. This physicality suggests again that these are not abstractions but manifestations, palpable incarnations of abstract systems. The viewer does not merely look at but rather peers into a wax painting such as Scherzo in E (2011) (fig. 1), as though seeing columns of light simultaneously penetrating and reflecting against banks of fog, or observing a body of water, tracking the visual rhythm of light rippling against waves, the bright silverance of leaves and sticks floating on the surface and the cool, removed and obscured fish darting underneath. There is also something very human in the wax’s matte texture, which Tom Breidenbach described as a “flesh-like translucence.”26 This lends these paintings a tattoo-like appearance. The principal forms are literally incised into the wax skin, albeit with a razor rather than a mechanized needle, and seem to float in or be suspended against a screen of imperfections, wrinkles, and scars.

The experience of peering into Banks’s work results from her literal layering of materials. A board is treated with pigment and wax. A thin linen scrim may be laid across the ground. More wax is applied in varying thicknesses, in clusters, smooth sheets, and the bubbling swaths. The wax layers spread, dry, and crack, leaving what may seem a topographical map or an aerial view of some ancient, now craggy and dried seabed. With a blade she returns to this surface to incise simple, almost monolithic shapes—the square, rectangle, and circle—then fills in these perfect razor-thin wounds with black, creating a deliberately sharp contrast with the milky ferment beneath. The forms, in their basic shape and spacing relate exactly to the notes from a measure of music, usually restricted to just the single treble clef. Colors also come from the written music and are assigned according to the seven major keys: A major is red, B orange, C yellow, D green, E blue, F violet, and G neutral. In some recent works such as Capriccio in A (2011), the forms have swollen or even exploded to fill the whole piece, resulting in a bold and startling allover compositional style. In these examples Banks has come the farthest from a strict translation or transcription of the existing grid of the musical staff.

She explains that even though the score remains central for its structure and inspiration, she decided that it does not have to be treated as a “precious thing.”
Despite my insistence on reading her paintings as material manifestations, Banks's personal process of recoding musical notes into visual art must also be acknowledged as a process of abstraction. Though she represents both the shapes and hollow spaces embedded in the music, she does so through a process of simplification rather than a strict transcription. In earlier musical works such as *Maple Leaf Rag* (1987), the oldest work in this exhibition, Banks has simplified the relationship between music and image. For example, as previously mentioned, she typically restricts her interest to the treble clef and avoids any inclusion of accidentals—there is no indication of sharp or flat keys or notes. Nor does she indicate meter or rhythm by differentiating quarter notes, half notes, etc. She is not trying to re-create the sheet music; she does not intend that someone be able to play her paintings. Rather, the formal language of musical notation inspires her. In this sense, she is re-crafting from her music the same way that some artists abstract from nature; she freely adapts her subject into color and shape.

That she re-creates music into a new physical form, abstracting from the already abstract to paradoxically create something potent and immediate is evidenced not only in the works themselves, but also in how she names them. Works on paper, typically modest in size, are presented in groups, with eight to twelve measures of one song framed as a single piece, and typically are named according to the source song's name. The larger, more imposing canvas paintings, however, are given titles that do not reflect their source. Often, by the time the paintings are finished she has discarded the songs that provided inspiration, choosing instead for the works to stand on their own. It is as though they have become their own selves, transformed into new bodies, and deserve new names descriptive of their autonomous aesthetic presence. However, the names still come from musical words and phrases as Banks essentially chooses to forget what has come before and instead allows each new painting to speak its own presence.

At the same time, the viewer should not ignore that through a witty interplay of abstraction and manifestation, Banks has found a way to perform music visually. This process of simplifying and abstracting, of picking and choosing which notes to manifest, is somewhat analogous to musical improvisation. Jazz musicians go through similar processes when soloing, as they riff on a particular melodic fragment from the written tune, repeat and rephrase notes played by other musicians, or spontaneously create new melodies that fit alongside the original song. What distinguishes Banks’s process from the jazz musician’s is the absence of mistakes—perhaps a better word is surprises—of thickness or covered up, but are folded into the evolving performance flow. These surprises are often emphasized and repeated, and may bring completely new or previously unnoticed elements of the song to the surface, revealing pathetic, biting, or even silly incarnations of the same tune. Inherent in this experimentation is the seeming paradox of finding freedom through structure, as most, though not all improvisations take place within a set of rules, a chord progression or given mode.

Banks emphasizes that she relies on a structured process, on the formal skeleton of the grid and her chosen correlation between colors and notes, in order to induce freedom, that working within a system opens avenues for experimentation. Banks’s improvisations include queer-colored layering or modulation, the unplanned but essential buildup of complex surface texture, circles that sometimes appear without any relationship to the source music, and the occasional inclusion of incised words from song titles or lyrics. When asked about these,
explained that there is a personal component to her works in wool, as she says there are times when working on a large painting becomes overwhelming, and it is therapeutic to work on a smaller scale with her hands, crocheting the wool. She says that in the deep winter, for example, she finds herself more interested in working with yarn than painting.

Feminist reclamation of craft is not the only social or political framework through which some have viewed Banks’s work. Though she insists that her paintings are appreciated on their own terms, in the past some critics and gallery owners questioned her art because of her identity as a black woman artist. In interviews, Banks has explained that these individuals did not think a black woman would, or should, paint in an abstract grid like Mondrian or use Bach and Beethoven as source material.6 Banks refuses to even consider their arguments, insisting that she has many progenitors and is the inheritor of many different artistic styles. She mines a vast musical and artistic past and does not alter her approach according to the source material’s supposed racial implications, but rather allows for the organic experimentation of the moment. Despite the fact that she rejects racial motivation in her own process, she admits being unable to work from spirituals earlier in her career, for emotional reasons.8 She has since completed numerous series of spirituals, including the pieces presented in this exhibition: Go Tell it on the Mountain (2010), Mary Had a Baby (2010), and I’ll Fly Away (2010).

Banks’s works in all media form an extended visual and material meditation on the interrelation of communication systems, as her own process of translating sheet music interacts with Western music’s linguistic notation. She acknowledges that both art objects and sheet music communicate through symbols, materials, and patterns. When I asked her about the words incised into one of her paintings, she said simply, “Words are very important.” It was not, it seemed, that she was saying the meanings of words are important, although that is certainly true, but rather that words in themselves, the existence of signs that communicate despite their arbitrary and imperfect correlations, is of considered significance to understanding her work. This may be why she was drawn to musical notation as a source, and chooses not to express her reaction to or experience of sound visually, as some other musically inclined artists have done. The linguistic function may also account for the glyphic appearance of her works. In their formal simplicity and rectilinear articulation, her paintings may recall the purity of Islamic calligraphy. Carved into rough, craggy wax, they suggest wind-worn Mayan steles with rectangular cartouches cut into their faces. The liquid pigment and handmade paper bring to mind some undeciphered East Asian text.

Though Banks does not deliberately intend these correlations, they nonetheless speak to her artistic purpose. Banks is concerned with musical notation as a representational system, as an arbitrary language related and connected to other languages, to other ways of ordering and encoding thoughts and messages. Drawn to these symbolic systems, she paints and weaves designs whose repeating symbolic patterns emphasize the way humans think. Through her work, Banks shows us that we can communicate, not only through words, but also through shapes, sounds, and colors. To think with these objects and sensory experiences, to meditate through music and materials when working or feeling wool, when exploring pigment and wax, is to ask and answer with our eyes, ears, and hands, to contemplate the fundamental shapes and systems of communication.

6 Unless otherwise indicated, the author has drawn all thoughts and words attributed to Ellen Banks from personal conversations and interviews.

8 Ibid, 294.
PLATE 1
Cantus Firmus in E, 2011
Wax and pigment on board
24” x 24”

PLATE 2
Capriccio in A, 2011
Wax and pigment on board
24” x 24”
PLATE 3
Inverted Mordent in B, 2011
Wax and pigment on board
36" x 18"

PLATE 4
Melody in A, 2011
Wax and pigment on board
36" x 18"
PLATE 5
Scherzo in C, 2011
Wax and pigment on board
48” x 36”

PLATE 6
Scherzo in D, 2011
Wax and pigment on board
48” x 36”
PLATE 7
Scherzo in G, 2011
Wax and pigment on board
48” x 36”

PLATE 8
Trio in A, 2011
Wax and pigment on board
18” x 36”
PLATE 9
Chaconne in F, 2011
Wax and pigment on board
36" x 18"

PLATE 10
Mary Had a Baby, 2011
Mixed media on paper
31" x 21½"
PLATE 11
I’ll Fly Away, 2011
Mixed media on paper
27” x 30½”

PLATE 12
Troubled Waters, 2007
Mixed media on paper
32” x 23”
PLATE 13
Go Tell It on the Mountain, 2010
Mixed media on paper
23” x 30”

PLATE 14
Bagatelle in E, 2010
Wool yarn
20” x 14”
PLATE 15
Bagatelle in G, 2011
Wool yarn
20” x 141⁄2”

PLATE 16
Bagatelle in C, 2011
Wool yarn
17” x 14”
**EXHIBITION CHECKLIST**

**Maple Leaf Rag, 1987**  
Screen print  
15” x 48”

**Troubled Waters, 2007**  
Mixed media on paper  
32” x 23”

**Bagatelle in E, 2010**  
Wool yarn  
20" x 14”

**Go Tell It on the Mountain, 2010**  
Mixed media on paper  
23” x 30”

**I’ll Fly Away, 2011**  
Mixed media on paper  
27” x 30½”

**Mary Had a Baby, 2011**  
Mixed media on paper  
31” x 21½”

**When I Do the Hoochie Koochie in the Sky, 2010**  
Mixed media on paper  
39½” x 28”

**Bagatelle in B, 2011**  
Wool yarn  
14” x 14”

**Bagatelle in B, 2011**  
Wool yarn  
16½” x 15”

**Bagatelle in C, 2011**  
Wool yarn  
17” x 14”

**Bagatelle in G, 2011**  
Wool yarn  
20” x 14½”

**Cantus Firmus in E, 2011**  
Wax and pigment on board  
24” x 24”

**Capriccio in A, 2011**  
Wax and pigment on board  
24” x 24”

**Chaconne in F, 2011**  
Wax and pigment on board  
30” x 18”

**Inverted Mordent in B, 2011**  
Wax and pigment on board  
30” x 18”

**Scherzo in C, 2011**  
Wax and pigment on board  
48” x 36”

**Scherzo in D, 2011**  
Wax and pigment on board  
48” x 36”

**Scherzo in E, 2011**  
Wax and pigment on board  
48” x 36”

**Scherzo in F, 2011**  
Wax and pigment on board  
36” x 18”

**Scherzo in G, 2011**  
Wax and pigment on board  
48” x 36”

**Trio in A, 2011**  
Wax and pigment on board  
18” x 36”

**Bagatelle in B, (undated)**  
Wool yarn  
16” x 13½”

**Bagatelle in C, (undated)**  
Wool yarn  
16½” x 13½”

**Capriccio in A, 2011**  
Wax and pigment on board  
24” x 24”

**Cantus Firmus in E, 2011**  
Wax and pigment on board  
24” x 24”

**Maple Leaf Rag, 1987**  
Screen print  
15” x 48”

**Troubled Waters, 2007**  
Mixed media on paper  
32” x 23”

**Bagatelle in E, 2010**  
Wool yarn  
20” x 14”

**Go Tell It on the Mountain, 2010**  
Mixed media on paper  
23” x 30”

**I’ll Fly Away, 2011**  
Mixed media on paper  
27” x 30½”

**Mary Had a Baby, 2011**  
Mixed media on paper  
31” x 21½”

**When I Do the Hoochie Koochie in the Sky, 2010**  
Mixed media on paper  
39½” x 28”

**Bagatelle in B, 2011**  
Wool yarn  
14” x 14”

**Bagatelle in B, 2011**  
Wool yarn  
16½” x 15”

**Bagatelle in C, 2011**  
Wool yarn  
17” x 14”

**Bagatelle in G, 2011**  
Wool yarn  
20” x 14½”

**Cantus Firmus in E, 2011**  
Wax and pigment on board  
24” x 24”

**EXHIBITION CHECKLIST**

**ELLEN BANKS**

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## Selected Honors and Awards

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## Selected Collections

- Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
- Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, MA
- Boston Public Library, Boston, MA
- Bunting Institute, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA
- Citicorp, New York, NY
- Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
- Federal Reserve Bank, Boston, MA
- First National Bank, Boston, MA
- Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
- Museum for the National Center of Afro-American Artists, Boston, MA
- Makishe Museum, Berlin, Germany
- New York Public Library, New York, NY
- Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
- Schomburg Center, New York, NY
- University of Campinas, Campinas, Brazil
- Yale University Art Collection, New Haven, CT

## Selected Bibliography

- 1997 The Boston Globe, Gate McQuaig
- 1994 Die Welt, Germany
- 1992 Berliner Morgenpost, Renee Schipp, Germany
- The Christian Science Monitor, Addison Parks
- 1990 Art Forum International, Francine Koslow
- The Boston Globe, Nancy Snapen
- The Boston Phoenix, Rebecca Nemser
- 1989 Art News, David Bonetti
- The New York Times, Robin Hardmann
- The Boston Globe, Christine Tomin
- Art Papers, Christian Walker
- 1986 Correo Popular, Brazil
- 1981 Art News, Pamela Allen
- 1978 Arts Magazine, Noel Freeman
- The New York Times, Henri Ghent