


harrietJOHNS / paintings on metal

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a Western Eye monograph

It is the immediacy of the impressions, the transience of light, the play of moving clouds that I seek to record internally and capture in some fleeting form. It is as if the imprint, the seeing felt on my psyche is to be recalled and developed later. The power of the impressions, the spontaneous, the ever changing real. It is like the emotional power overriding all. It is Pachamama—the Earth Mother that I respond to, not the linear, predictable surface but the gut beneath it—above it all. Encompassing, changing, light, space form—the intent. Energy. Emotional power.

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H. Johns, Arequipa, Peru, 1978



Harriet Johns' work inhabits an uneasy no-man's land between accepted art genres. Somewhere left of painting, somewhere right of metal sculpture; somewhere north of architectural installations, but south of high-fire ceramic murals. Maybe I should have said that Johns' work inhabits an uneasy no-woman's land between genres. Because most of her life's work has been created in industrial plants—gritty, noisy, dirty, hard-hat, redneck, commercial enamel-on-steel signage plants—where an artist, any artist would be out of place, and a woman artist unimaginable.

The vividly colored, subtly layered and textured paintings that Johns has produced since 1972, and is still producing at the age of 82, are themselves hard to imagine, or would be, if we didn't have them here in front of us. You had to think of it (think of a medium that nobody else was using). You had to stretch (stretch the limits of that medium to accommodate your vision). And she did. Johns 'paintings on metal,' a term I'll use as shorthand for the more accurate but cumbersome "fired porcelain enamel images on heavy-gauge low-relief steel panels," are case studies in bending

an alien technology (or technique) to an inspired artist's equally alien purpose.

Just what purpose? Where do these images come from? Where do they take us? Why has HJ (as her friends call her) devoted so much of her life to the elaboration and refinement of this body of work that refuses to fit any established art-world genre?

It started with color, it's always been about color, it's still about color. True, there's more to this work than color. Johns' forms are strong and abstract. Her gestures are anything but mechanical—defined by swift, sure movements of arm and hand, pencil and chalk, not ruler and straight edge. A fresh, hand-molded geometry rules her big enamel-on-steel panels. But nonetheless, the beginning and end, the center and core of each piece is its color.

These fired vitreous enamel colors have a palpable, almost physically measurable depth. The word 'enamel' can't do justice to these colors. The colors of these enameled paintings are neither flat-opaque nor transparent-translucent, but once again something in between. Pure chroma, turned into glass, turned into metal. These colors absorb light



and give it back transformed. Not dull and matte, but at the same time not glossy and reflective, always somewhere mysteriously in between. John's panels glow, softly but insistently, Whether layed on flat, or broken up, or occasionally fragmented into very non-enamel textures, Johns' colors are always alive, always talking to us.

In search of contrast, of a foil for the purity and depth of saturated enamel color, Johns spotted some residue from tanks of acid in the enamel plant and decided to apply this gunky material onto parts of her large compositions, then fuse it with more heat to add an unexpectedly rough texture. "You can't do that," the plant workers told her. "That won't work." People have been telling HJ "You can't do that!" all her life, and she has always gone ahead and done it. It's always worked. In this case the result was a series of powerful dark paintings in her Stone + Steel series. Sections of these large three-by-four foot panels remind us of congealed charcoal-black volcanic lava, challenged by angular bands of bloody crimson and vermilion enamel.

Like many intuitive colorists, Johns can't say exactly

what makes two or three colors talk to each other, work with each other, and bring a piece to life. But she is more adamant and decisive about her color judgements than about any other aspect of her art or, for that matter, her life. She has gone to impossible lengths to mix paint for the houses and studios that she has designed and built out of straw bales, railroad cars, and occasionally more conventional materials. (Just this, precisely this... only this brand-new and unexpected warmish brownish grey....and not that one...)

Yet for all her decisiveness in thinking about color, in selecting and combining her pigments, John's process has a built-in sponaneity in its very chemistry and physics. Until 1500-degree heat fuses her pigments to the metal, it is impossible to know, for sure, exactly, what the final color will be. But over time, in a series of improbably gritty commercial enamel signage plants, Johns has learned to stack the cards, the forces and flames of hazard, in her favor. Her colors are her own, and unique. They emerge from fire, but they always come straight from the heart.

Lito Tejada-Flores



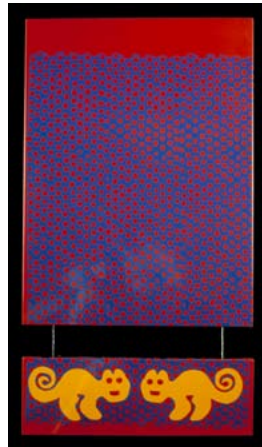
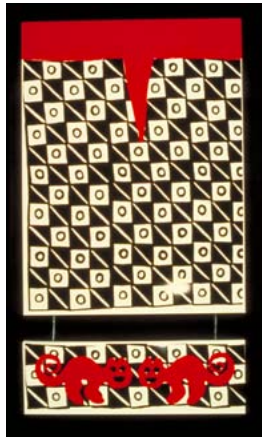






the **altiplano** series



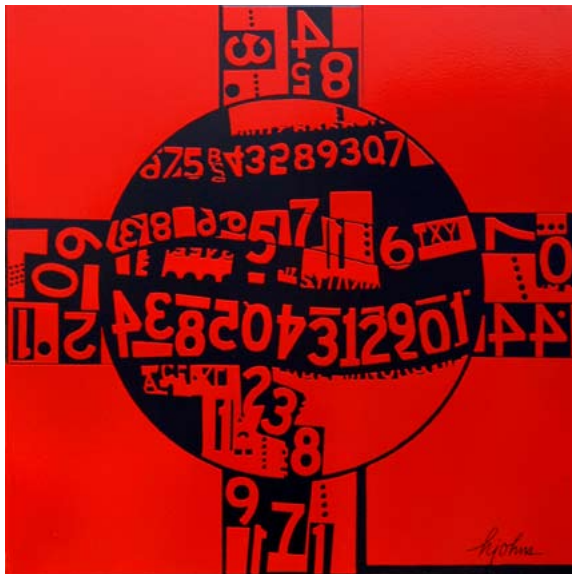
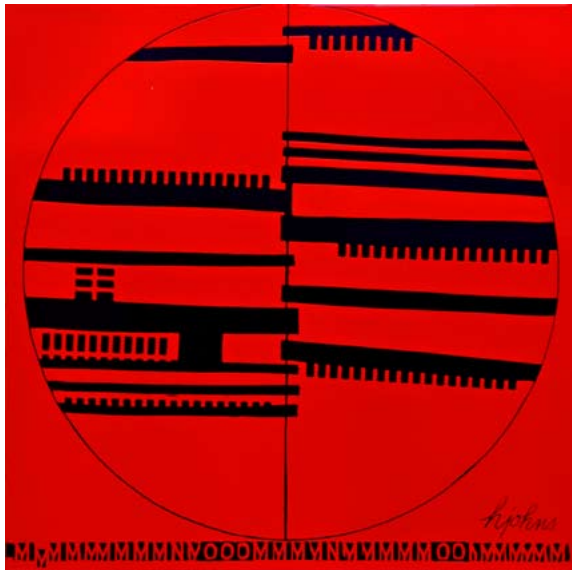






the **communication** series



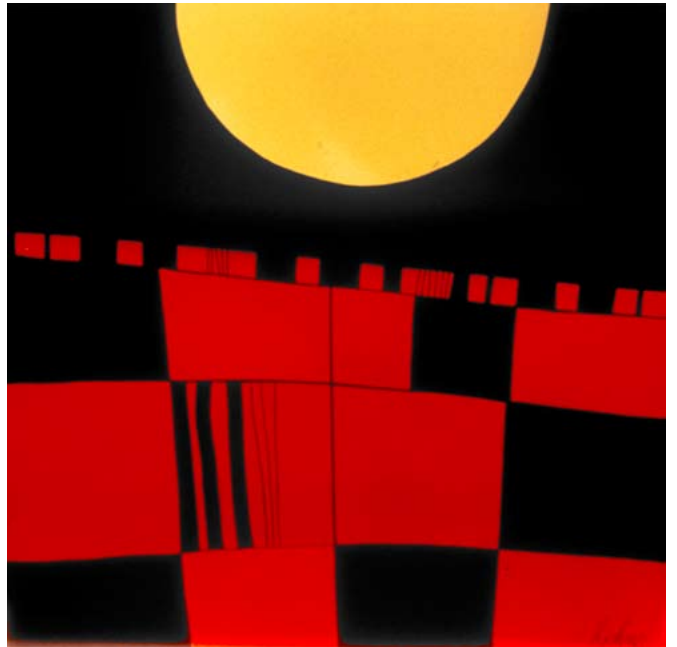
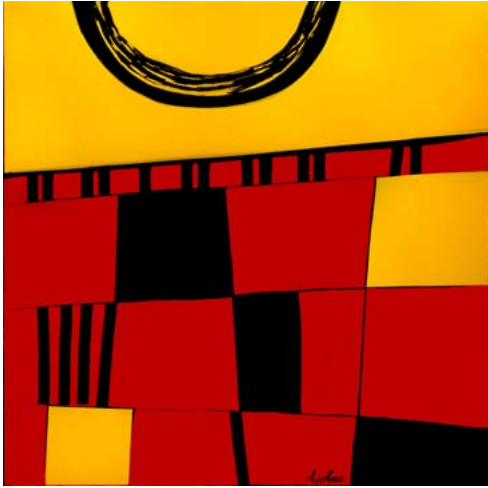


the **stone + steel** series

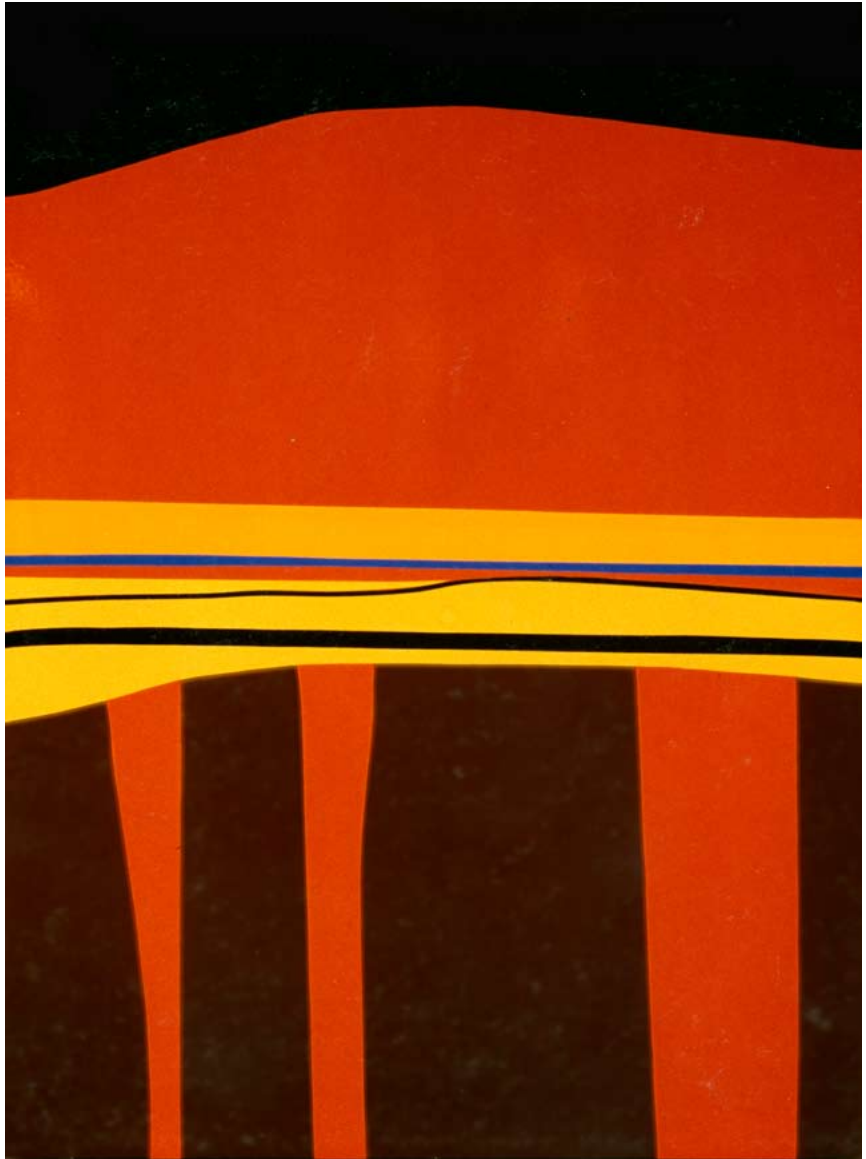




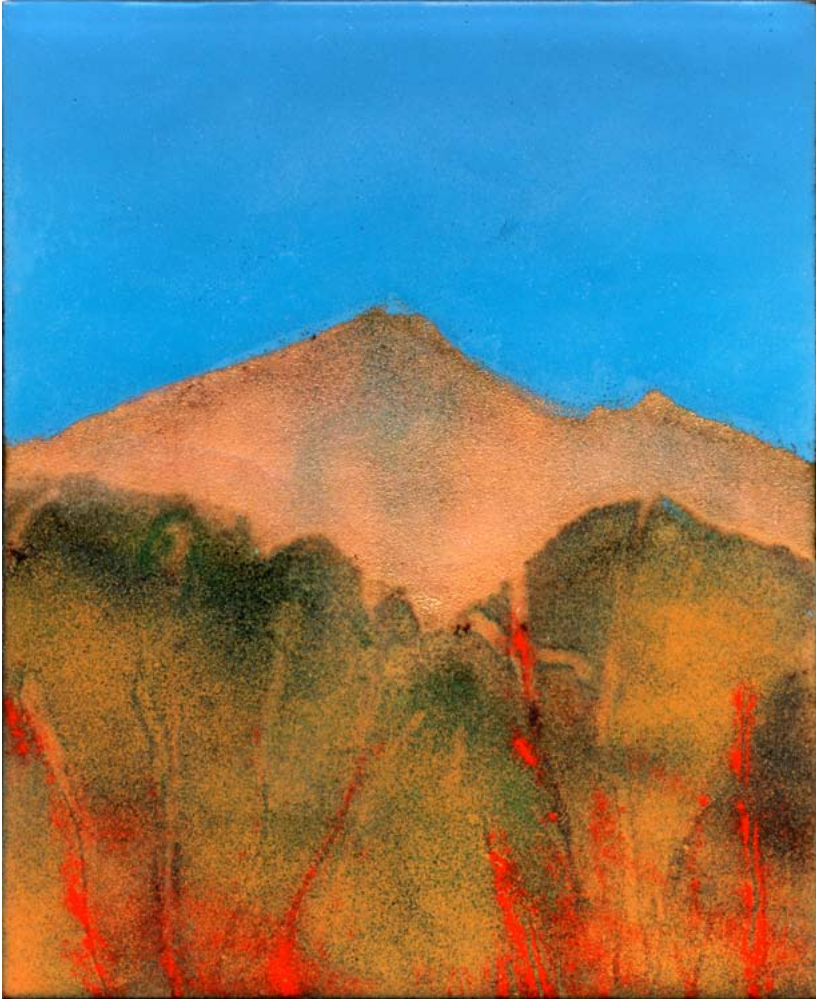


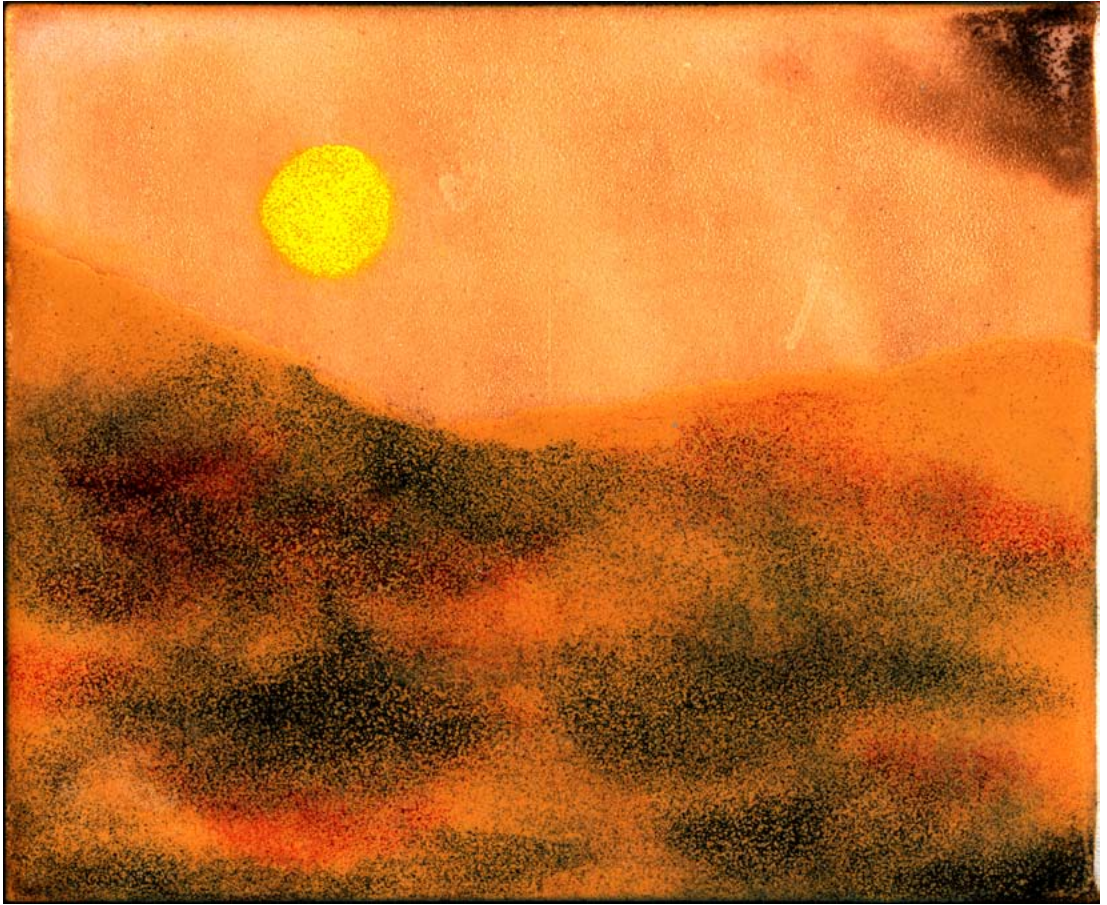


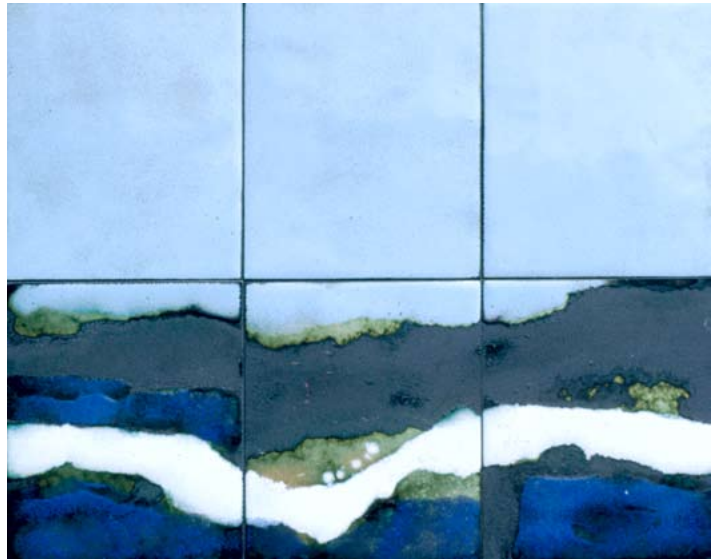


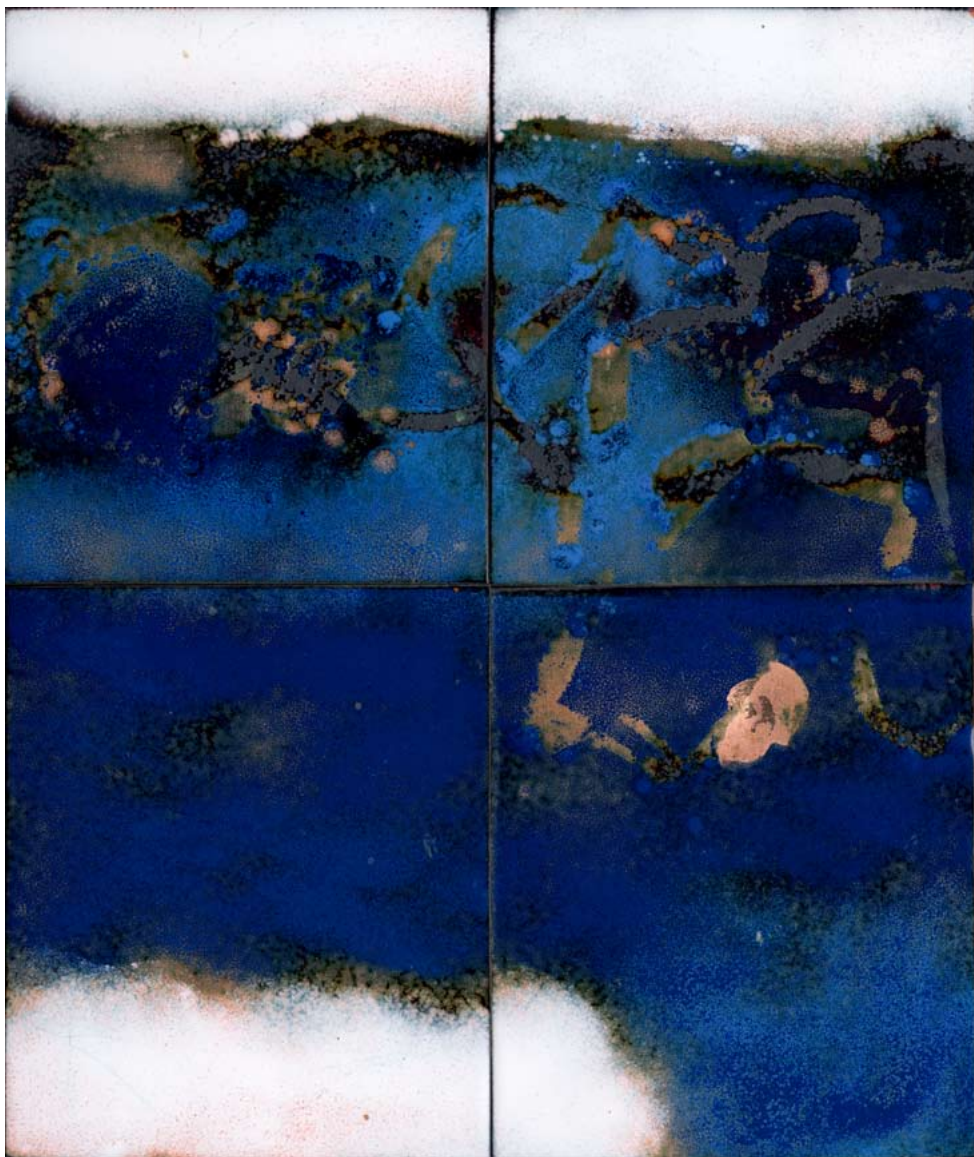


the **landscape** series









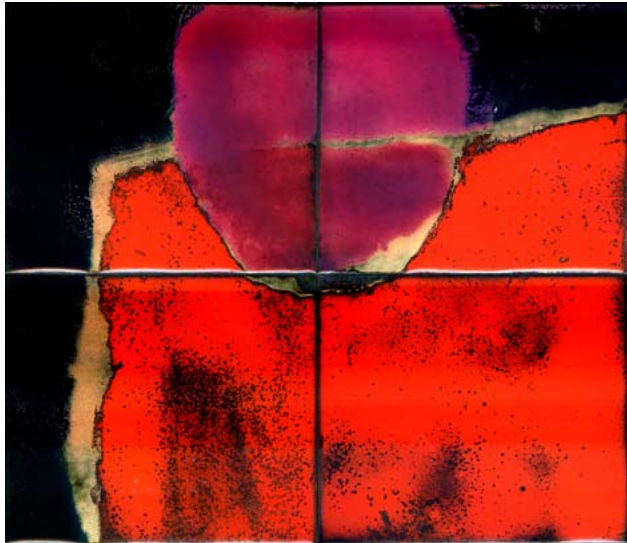
the mythic bestiary series





the **energy** series





the bears series









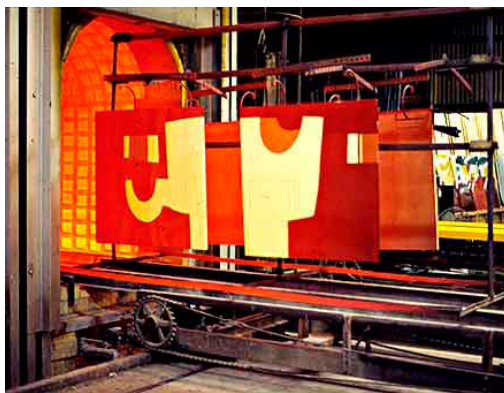
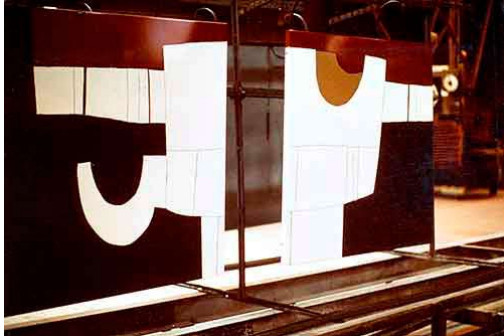
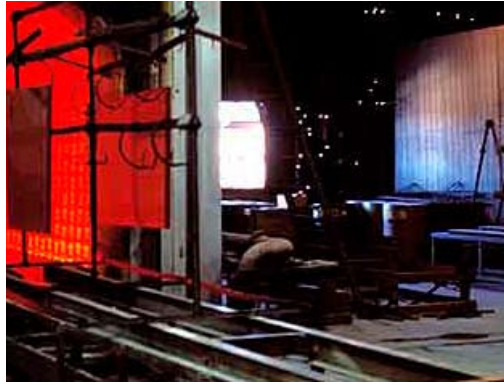
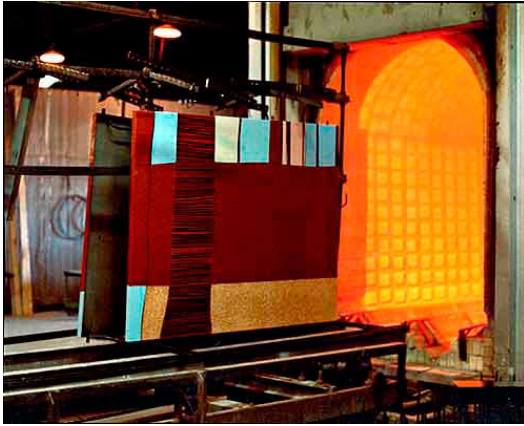
working with fire

Harriet Johns is an artist who works primarily in vitrified porcelain enamel on steel and copper panels. She is, by turns, a painter, print maker, sculptor and architect/builder, but her inspiration is always born of fire.

Johns began working in enamel in the early 70s at the Pioneer Enamel Plant in Seattle. This medium, largely ignored by the fine art world, was a revelation. Johns knew immediately that she had found her natural medium. A lifetime of travel, looking and questioning plus an intuitive feeling for the expressive power of color have provided her shifting but internally consistent subject matter.

John's work is now available through the Glenn Green Galleries just outside Santa Fe in the village of Tesuque. Glenn runs one of Santa Fe's premier galleries representing artists like Alan Houser, Eduardo Oropesa, Melanie Yazzie, and other equally creative figures in American & international art... You are invited to contact the Glenn Green Galleries for current prices and available works.

505 820 0008, or www.glenngreengalleries.com







harriet**JOHNS**:



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Exhibitions:

- Bank of America World Headquarters, San Francisco
- University of San Francisco
- Boise Gallery of Art
- L'Art de l'Emeil, Biennale Internationale, invitational, Limoges, France
- Houston Museum of Fine Art
- Source Gallery, San Francisco
- Art Showplace, Seattle
- Shaw-Rimington Gallery, Toronto
- Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley California
- Richmond Art Center, Berkeley California
- Oakland Museum, Oakland California


Corporate Collections:

- Hanover Capitol, New York
- Clorox Corporation, Oakland
- Crocker National Bank, San Francisco
- Aluminex, San Francisco
- Transamerica, San Francisco
- Hyatt Regency, San Francisco
- Barclays Bank, San Francisco

Architectural Commissions (large-scale enamel and enamel mural installations):

- IBM, San Jose California
- Morrison Performing Arts Center, Boise, Idaho
- US Naval Credit Union, San Diego
- Central Federal Savings, San Diego
- Hyatt Regency Hotel, Dearborn Michigan
- Woodlands Inn, Houston Texas
- Sheraton-Harbor Island Hotel, San Diego
- Plaza Mall, Sacramento Californian
- and numerous private residences



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