

# Annabeth Marks: *Extender*

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**John Michael  
Kohler Arts Center**

After installing the artwork for her exhibition *Extender*, artist Annabeth Marks (A) sat down with Curator Laura Bickford (L) to discuss painting, her process, and abstraction

**L:** Will you talk a little about what you made for this exhibition, *Extender*?

**A:** For this exhibition I made a group of ten new paintings that are all a small to medium sized scale. They are all oil or acrylic on canvas. The paintings have sculptural elements; they have dimension and relief, the canvas is folded, tucked, wrapped, and bound to the stretcher. These paintings have a strong sense of having been constructed, both sculpturally using pieces of canvas as well as through highly tuned color relationships. The title of the exhibition, *Extender*, refers to the areas of the painting that extend off the stretcher and into space, reinforcing the sense of the painting as a dimensional object.

**L:** This exhibition is part of a series called *Return to the Real*—a celebration of reconnecting with people and spending time with art in galleries, rather than online experiences. Thinking about people being in a space with your paintings, is there an interaction that you hope the works prompt or a conversation that you think they're starting? Some sort of response that you want them to solicit? How does your work relate to this idea of living and art in public spaces?

I feel grateful for the accessibility that occurred this year in being able to view so much art and attend talks online and do hope that this continues. But of course there is always so much to be gleaned from experiencing some types of work in person if one can.

The paintings in *Extender* are so much about the interaction of flat color and gesture, in relation to the very complex material reality of the surfaces. Because of this, the experience of viewing these works in person is completely different than how they read in image form.

The color relationships and dynamics that happen within each painting and across the room build an experience that can't be felt or understood fully in documentation. These paintings ask that the viewer slows down in some way, as the work unfolds over time and relationships are built between paintings. There is a gut level, emotional currency that the highly saturated color in these works provokes, that very much prioritizes feeling and experiencing in an embodied way.



# Annabeth Marks: Extender

**L:** For this exhibition, you worked at quite a different scale than you have in the past. What prompted that shift? What did you learn about your work, or what are you still learning, by making something in this new, more intimate scale?

**A:** I was responding to the conditions of this past year. I was thinking about intimacy and distance. Previously, I had worked at the scale of the body—in paintings made using found and used jackets—or larger than the body—in large-scale paintings and banner pieces. There was always an element of immersion in this work that was a given because of the scale of these works.

During this year my thoughts around the psychology of scale and the possibility of smaller paintings changed a lot. I was thinking about how a larger work asks that you step back from it to take it in visually. And generally, small paintings ask that you get closer. The kind of intimacy of viewing a small object is charged in a completely different way.

I was also responding to the space that the paintings would be exhibited in at JMKAC. Because the space is narrow, I realized that the edge of works would be a very important and prominent part of viewing the exhibition. And each painting was made with that very much taken into account.

**L:** Let's talk a little bit about your process. How do you start a painting, how do you work on it, and then how do you know it's done?

**A:** These paintings build up slowly over time, and I am working on many of them at once.

For me, painting is a process of constant revision. The work is created through a process of unstretching, cutting, and attaching to new surfaces, over and over again in some pieces. Because of this, the structure of the stretcher, the height and width of its face and edges become formal elements in the painting and guide the patterning that happens.

There is a lot of movement and mobility that occurs between surfaces as paintings are cut off the stretcher and moved. This process continually proposes a new identity for the painting and relationships between ideas of the window, patterning, surface, and object quality of the painting.

When a painting is finished, it is generally very clear to me; it feels right, and there is a sense of closure I have with the process. If it doesn't feel like it needs anything else and it contains its own presence, then it feels complete. That sense of completeness is specific to each painting and is what I am responding to.

**L:** How do you think about deconstruction and reconstruction? In relation to each other and your work?

**A:** Deconstruction and reconstruction are modes through which I am able to think through something, understand it, digest it. This process is informed by many years of working with garments. For about five years I have been making paintings using previously worn jackets bought from thrift stores, which I then take apart, cutting along the seams, and then reconstruct the object in a way that is new to me.

There is so much information embedded in a jacket; it is worn as a kind of second skin, and it contains so much information about its construction, about style, and class. There is also a lot of psychic information and energy that the material holds. A jacket is worn like another skin; it is a layer of protection from the elements. There are so many ideas about porousness and protection between bodies and their environments bound up in these works that has now become deeply embedded in these small paintings. A lot of the paintings wrap around the stretcher, almost like the stretcher is the body and there is another layer, like a garment, that it is wearing.



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This exhibition is supported by the **Kohler Trust for Arts and Education**, the **Frederic Cornell Kohler Charitable Trust**, **Kohler Foundation, Inc.**, and the **Wisconsin Arts Board** with funds from the **State of Wisconsin** and the **National Endowment for the Arts**.



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**L:** Talk a little bit more about that, about these different layers on the paintings.

**A:** These paintings are so much about flat color and gesture in relation to the material construction that is happening on the surface. While color and gesture create depth and interiority within areas of the paintings, there is also a density of layering, weaving, and folding happening on the surface that almost acts as a kind of foil to the interior spaces, that draws the painting out into dimensional space. I am interested in the paintings containing both of these spatial relationships—spaces that are internal and external; it forces the eye to move in and out between both literal depth and illusion of depth.

This layering of surfaces is uniquely related to and informed by my work with garments. In some of the paintings, there is a monochrome rectangle that has a separate surface that is wrapped around it or bound to it. There is a doubling that occurs—the painting is wearing a painting. This changes the way we can think about the surface of the work and evokes a relationship in which the stretcher becomes like a torso. There are many associations attached to this—the painting becomes like an apron, a shield, or some sort of celestial vest that is being worn. This secondary layer extends the idea of what a surface is or could be in this work.

**L:** You mentioned in that description the other element of your work that we haven't talked about, that is color and the intentional use of color. Is there something that you want to say about color?

**A:** I think about color as material and matter that is both structural and intuitive. I use highly saturated colors in a lot of my work because I am interested in the ways that color absorbs and projects into the space around it. It has the potential to affect people viewing it on a deep guttural and emotional level.

When making a painting, I am constantly tuning opacity, saturation, and hue until it feels right. That thing about it feeling right is part of why it is fascinating to me. When it is right it just is—you accept it, it does something to you, it is extremely specific.

**L:** Okay. Then similarly, a final question. What do you gravitate to, as an abstract painter? What about abstraction feels important, or speaks to you, or confuses you, challenges you, excites you?

**A:** Sometimes I wonder about the term abstraction, as it reinforces a separation or distinction between abstraction and representation that sometimes I don't fully believe exists.

It makes me think about what the difference is between a depiction of something and an embodiment of something, or figurative painting vs. something else that contains qualities of a body, that is like a body rather than a likeness of a body. It sits differently in relation to language and associative possibility.

Abstraction has the ability to give a tangible form to something that is as unformed visually as a feeling. And for me that is an endlessly fascinating place to explore.

I am interested in the between-ness, the ability for abstract qualities to make us think of things in the world—that exist, but it also can keep moving and circle around many different names for things but not quite land—it keeps going and unfolding. That's the place that I am interested in my paintings sitting in. They are unknown, yet they contain a real presence as things in the world.

**Cover**  
(front) Annabeth Marks, *Solitude Barrier*, 2021; acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist. Photo courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center.  
(back) Annabeth Marks, *Flat Winged Body Pocket*, 2021; acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist. Photo courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

**1** Annabeth Marks, (from left) *Protections IV*, *Protections V*, *Protections VI* (installation view), 2020; oil and acrylic paint on leather coat; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

**2** Annabeth Marks, *Extender*, 2021; acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist. Photo courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center.