



Celebration, acrylic on archival watercolour paper, 2022

FRANCES FERDINANDS COVENANT OF CIRCLES

May 4 - June 29, 2024



Covenant of Circles

In Islamic art, the geometric figure of the circle is seen as infinite. It represents both unity and the ultimate source of diversity in nature. The circle is the symbol that links the work in Frances Ferdinands' exhibition, from its title *Covenant of Circles* to the ways that the artist has deftly manipulated the shape across three bodies of work.

Ferdinands, who hails from Sri Lanka, was inspired by the ancient circular shapes found primarily on the ceilings of Sri Lankan temples, mandala shapes (*Mandala* literally translating as 'circle' in Sanskrit) that are intrinsic to the culture, as well as the full moon 'Poya' days which mark the Buddhist lunar calendar.

Her series *White on Rice* (2022-2024) which lines one wall of the Art Gallery of Northumberland, is comprised of six kaleidoscopic, celebratory acrylic works on paper, each one beginning with a geometrical inclination: a compass, a pencil, a ruler, a gesture. The reworkings of overlapping circles unite and diverge to form patterns including six-petal flowers, eight-pointed stars, full, half and quarter moons, simplified arabesques and more complex geometric patterns. Detailed florals are given ample breathing room and function both from a distance and especially close up, contrasting with flat planes of colour. It's as if there is a spotlight shining on the intricate patterns, encouraging a closer viewing. In 2019, Ferdinands travelled to the UK where she studied Middle Eastern patterns and learned to draw the complex designs seen throughout Turkey, Spain and Morocco. Applied throughout this exhibition in circle-based shapes that overlap in a pleasingly ordered style, they come together with western references as well. Some areas recall the intricate geometrical tile work of the Alhambra Palace in southern Spain and others the late 19th century wallpapers of British textile designer William Morris. The result is a thoroughly relatable language wherein florals and simplified geometric shapes refract against one another. Every detail is precise, resting obediently within the lines, and yet the artist works intuitively, letting the patterns and shapes unfold with little preconceived planning. This interplay between regulation and intuition is perhaps what is so intriguing about the works. They are clean, graphic, even musical-like re-arrangements of ancient symbols and patterns from non-western cultures. Beginning always with a single circle, the process of selecting which parts to reveal and which to conceal happens over time, a series of decisions that are not without problems, but as she points out, also create opportunities.

They sometimes appear as collages: when Ferdinands inconveniently drifts off into an unwanted direction, the portion that she likes is cut out and reapplied to a new paper, providing a starting point for a new language.

Conversely, the five large canvases placed around the gallery are dense with colour and shape. Shades of teal and violet dominate two of the paintings, all acrylic on canvas, while pinks and oranges define the others, with a cheery helping of fresh green throughout. The colour orange is found across Ferdinands' entire artistic practice, and she admits that the saffron hue of the Buddhist monk's robe resides in her subconscious. Together with red and gold, these are the Sri Lankan colours. And part of the joy in her process is in selecting the seemingly infinite variations on these colours and their complementary opposites. Another strikingly graphic quality to the work is the technique of layering sharply defined shapes, with no smudging, following the South Asian tradition of outlining pattern against flat planes of colour. Ferdinands builds up her paintings, beginning with a series of large, broad, simple coloured shapes and then adding and subtracting increasingly complex elements and patterns to create a disorienting push/pull sensation in the viewer. Close inspection reveals a deliberate use of archival marker across her work, chosen to maintain crisp details, but only where necessary. In these large paintings, Ferdinands has at times allowed the pen to create free flowing lines and patterns within shapes as well. These include eastern elements like the Buddhist sacred monument, the stupa, alongside various musical instruments, vases, even the ancient symbol of the quatrefoil. There are fun cut out moons that recall paper snowflakes made by children.

The feel is one of craft, collage, festivity and décor that, through the always dominant circle, is reflected in the installation at the heart of the exhibition.

This impressive piece, titled 109: The Domestic & Divine, alludes in its title to the Buddhist or Hindu Mala, or prayer beads, that are meant for contemplation. One hundred and eight elements, plus one (representing the Mala's connecting bead) are suspended from the ceiling, interspersed with similarly-sized mirrors and all framed by embroidery hoops, the highly-charged symbol of traditional 'women's work' that encouraged a downward looking, focused concentration that turned its user's attention inward. Here the hoops are stretched not with embroideries but with found lace doilies that are beaded, painted and stretched onto the hoops. Others are carefully stretched with painted mandalas and phrases designed to suggest mantras. Each element hangs from a string of vintage beads sourced by the artist. Here, the domestic has been reframed as a joyful space equated with the artist's own handiwork—a process which she enjoys immensely. Overall, the effect is joyous, craft-based and colourful, a free-hanging riot of pattern and colour as if the nearby paintings had jumped from their canvases and joined the party. And yet the details contained within the installation seek to link the act of creation with that of inward reflection. The fundamental symbol of the circle is thus an apt theme for this exhibition. For Ferdinands, the aim is for the visitor to feel a sense of spirituality, connection and peace through the idea of meditative labour, "a way of knowing the world that can only be gained by working with our hands."

— Andrea Carson Barker

Andrea Carson Barker is a former art critic and a passionate supporter of artists and designers, particularly in Toronto and Markham, where she is president of Arbutus Real Estate Ltd. and oversees its project Industrial Arts. She is founder of Steelcase Art Projects, a not-for-profit organization whose mission is to transform Industrial Arts into a site for artistic experimentation through collaborations, commissions and projects. Working with the site's tenants and with the surrounding community, SAP connects business to the arts through unconventional collaborations in the industrial realm.

Trained as an art critic in the U.K. she founded View on Canadian Art, one of Canada's first and most widely read culture blogs (2005-2015). In 2011, she was founding curator of daily online art auction site Artbombdaily.com and since 2023 is co-publisher of Untitled: A Public Art Zine. She is a member of the City of Toronto Public Art Commission and Markham's Varley Art Gallery acquisitions committee.