



Volker Tannert: *Untitled*, 1984, oil on canvas, 71 by 166 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches; at Sonnabend.

encourage an alternative reading, one that eschews the illusion of scaled distance and allows the viewer to more easily reconcile surface and image.

Stamos's format consists of an irregular rectangular shape, usually vertical, disposed against a ground and divided into three parts either by contrasting color areas or by a meandering ribbon of color. The image recalls coastal terrain seen from a height great enough to reduce topographical detail to color and texture. Begun in the early '70s, the "Lefkada" series (named for the island in Greece where Stamos spends a good part of each year) originally evoked walls of light; but the recognizably geometric shapes along with colors that tended toward a more predictable optical stimulation have given way over time to amorphous forms and an increasingly painterly color more compatible with Stamos's sensibility.

He is a painter of lyric impulse, and his work is best appreciated by an eye attuned to those pictorial qualities, whether of color shape or texture, that were celebrated according to late Romantic criteria as beautiful. Clear intense color (or color combinations that produce a similar resonant effect); indeterminate shapes that yet do not resist regularization (see Ruskin on clouds); an overall texture and disposition of shape that can be read as pattern—these are elements that still signify beauty in nature (and do so democratically for whoever takes the trouble to look). In Stamos's work, the hard-learned lessons of Abstract Expressionism—trust in the expressive potential of the gestural mark and the painterly accident, and what seemed then a universally understood tectonics of picture-making—are directed toward the production of a beauty we have

come to think of as nature's own.

Many of the pieces shown are paintings on paper (22 by 30 inches). It is these modestly sized works that appear to be Stamos's primary undertaking; the image has a density that the canvases with their washes and their scumbled and blotted surfaces seem hard put to reproduce. There is a rightness to such a spirit and tempo of production, however Stamos has dedicated a number of works to the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, but Stamos's paintings have less to do with Friedrich's Christian allegories than with the tradition of theme and variation suggested by Whistler's studies of the Thames.

—Blair Birmelin

Volker Tannert at Sonnabend

Until recently I was convinced that of the contemporary German painters shown here in the past five years, Anselm Kiefer possessed the most apocalyptic vision; that was before I saw Volker Tannert's paintings. Tannert's undated cities, buried ruins and desolate landscapes all treat the theme of civilization on the verge of extinction. These scenes of natural catastrophe need only a Wagnerian dirge to accompany the dissolution of all human endeavor. Well, almost all. The Classical Ideal survives, in the form of Greek temples and Roman arches. Suppose you have to draw the line somewhere.

Tannert applies paint with savage authority. He reworks his canvases to a greater degree than most of his fellow Germans, solidifying his compositions and avoiding the broad and generalized paint handling that has become an Expressionist cliché. Unlike

Kiefer, who often uses found materials to construct his relief paintings, Tannert invariably builds up his images with thick, encrusted layers of paint, thereby achieving a similar three-dimensional effect.

Actually in subject and mood Tannert's paintings bear a greater resemblance to the work of the 19th-century German Romantic landscape painters, particularly Caspar David Friedrich. Tannert shares with Friedrich an avidity for crumbling ancient architecture (a common backdrop in Italian and French painting, less so in German art). In *How Much Beauty Can I Bear* 1984, a monumental, partially toppled arch against a fiery orange sky looms above the viewer. The heavily pigmented surface, with paint scraped or peeled away is consistent with the image of decay.

Also like Friedrich, Tannert paints craggy massive rock formations (seen in two untitled works here), often surrounded by turbulent, luminous waters that show his considerable gestural skills. Because Tannert's paintings tend to be dark, any illumination of form or object takes on a surreal, somewhat radioactive glow. Yet the physical appeal of his landscapes is so strong that one may momentarily forget how menacing they really are.

But if Friedrich longed for a more idyllic past, Tannert has a harsh, bleak view of the future. In *Praise the Planning*, 1984, a pair of dark-blue rectangular solids (looking ominously like the World Trade Center towers) are awash in a brown soup, the rest of the city completely covered by sludge. The scene is drained of color except for yellow sulfurous clouds in a deep-purple sky. The painting is frightening and funny at the same time, something like an updated Sodom and Gomorrah

disaster movie—don't look back from the Staten Island Ferry!

Sometimes Tannert's paintings are so laden with paint that the images become almost indecipherable. In *Rest in Peace*, 1984, the heavy globs of pigment in the foreground could be white bones or primitive tools. Behind them are flat slabs resembling tombstones or empty canvases lined up in a grotto covered by layers of brown and orange dirt. Perched high above this mountain of earth is a pale-pink Greek temple with a dark-blue roof unattainable and remote. A bit more baffling is *Amnesia*, a picture of three earthen jugs of varied sizes independently pouring water into a green pool; it's strange but hard to forget. Less obscure is an untitled work of several huge fallen trees lying in a lush green field. Tannert's use of a palette knife and somber colors is reminiscent of Courbet, with a similar vision of brooding nature. But Tannert is searching for single motifs that can embody a dream state beyond simple naturalism. More often than not, he finds them. —Robert G. Edelman