

George Billis, NY - Catalogue Essay

Those among us who have previously associated Steve Hicks with paintings of urban landscapes may initially be disconcerted to find him now entrenched as an abstract painter. But we shouldn't be puzzled: painters moving from figuration to abstraction -- and back again -- are now no more exceptional than New Yorkers adept at two languages (remember, even Mondrian painted flowers in tandem with his grids throughout his life).

Trawling through memories of his earlier experience as both carpenter and architect must have played some part in Hicks' decision to move to abstraction. Both are disciplines necessitating careful interlocking of shapes, first as two-dimensional plans, next as three-dimensional structures. And, conveniently for our purposes, they represent a move from the exterior (architecture) to the interior (carpentry). Which is precisely the difference between Hicks' figuration, where the action took place outside, in the street; and abstraction, which takes place inside Hicks' head: a much wider venue.

Beginning with a simple white plane, which strangely enough evokes less a void than a drifting of snow, Hicks proceeded to build up several planes, layering one atop another, often interleaving calligraphic traces between each level. The final compendium of planes and their markings can put one in mind of viewing the floor of a shallow pond from above through a sheet of thin ice. Or if one finds that a little too fanciful (too much ardent searching for faces in the fire, as when the panicky figurative mind has to confront autonomous abstraction), we can simply view it instead as the first lines of Hicks' new vocabulary.

This initial phase completed, Hicks began introducing color and started using his paint surface as a net for trapping shapes, culling from his adolescence a passion for Sufi calligraphy, that decorative script whose thick strokes -- so reminiscent of tyre skids -- invariably taper into hairline curls.

It's not so much that Hicks now follows Klee's example and takes his line for a walk, as he allows the painting to take him over, in the process discovering what we were told in our youthful instruction manuals: painting is fun. And fun for the diligent painter is, of course, one of the benevolent by-products of struggle.