New Works by Mark Sheinkman

January 14–April 10, 2005

Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art

Mark Sheinkman   Between Gesture and the Void

Mark Sheinkman approaches art making the way an architect designs a house; as a result, his paintings and drawings are distinctive, lyrical, and structurally sound. They are distinctive, in part, because these works are decidedly his own, reflecting the artist's knowledge of his predecessors and contemporaries. Their lyricism is reflected in Sheinkman's ability to create a space that is at once apprehensible and enigmatic. Not least of all, the structural soundness of his work is apparent in the inherent logic of its construction.

Over time, a painter's progress can be measured by the discovery and development of what constitutes the essential ingredients of his or her work. The direction that Sheinkman's work has taken has emerged from his commitment to drawing as a tool for an in-depth exploration of line, texture, and contrasts of light and dark. These investigations have led to an expanding range of spatially complex compositions that are rooted both in the gestural and the geometric. Somewhere between an unending line and the void, between marking the passage of time and infinite space, Sheinkman has staked his territory. In his most recent work, Sheinkman has focused almost exclusively on the ways in which line, in all its tonal variations, defines and activates the space it inhabits.

As a tool for Sheinkman's construction of pictorial space, the variations in the quality of line (broad or thin, straight or curved, fast or slow) and the clarity or definition of the line's edges (from sharp to blurred or dissolving) establish the range of shallow to deep space in each composition. In addition, by using tonality, the suggestion (if not the illusion) of cast shadow, and a layering or weaving of looping or straight lines, Sheinkman can either expand or reduce dramatically the depth of field in his paintings.
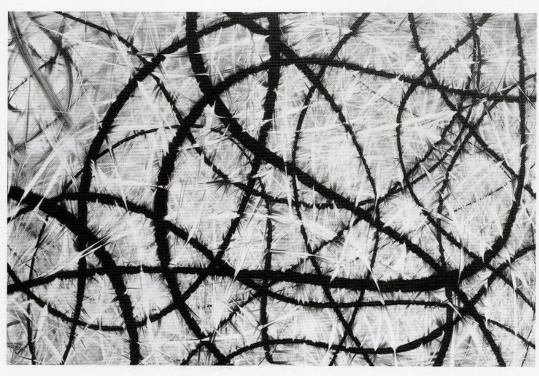
An assessment of Sheinkman's work invites a brief appraisal of the development of nonobjective painting in the United States since Jackson Pollock either accidentally or purposefully (depending on whom you believe) dripped his webs of paint on canvas on his studio floor in the late 1940s. Since that time, painters of the abstract persuasion have had to confront the maestro of the drip by a direct assault on his methodology, or enter into the fray of all that has come since then. No easy task, since an artist as estimable as Ad Reinhardt pronounced the demise of painting itself, at least in Western culture, a decade or so after Pollock "broke the ice."

After the critic Clement Greenberg entered the battle over what constituted an authentic mid-20th-century abstract painting (the integrity of the two-dimensional surface, courtesy of Cézanne, et al.), it appeared as though the problems of space and the elimination of representational references had at last been solved. The creation of an abstract painting was then reduced to a highly intellectual, seemingly technical exercise: how to cover a large tract of canvas without suggesting the illusion of space, or introducing anything in the painting that could be misconstrued as a "figure" or a "ground." Jules Olitski, Kenneth Noland, and Morris Louis, among others, all contributed to the vocabulary of abstraction, and brought it to a point of refinement so rarefied that it forced the next generation into real space, in an attempt to reduce sculpture to its bare essentials.
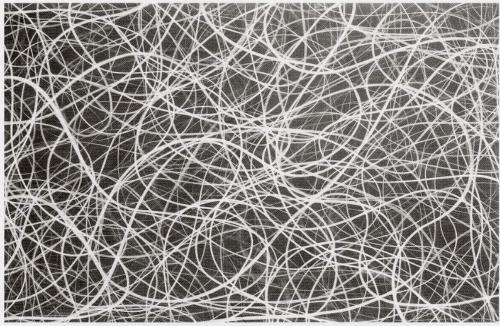
It took the irascible, cigar-chomping Frank Stella, in his renegade Norton Lectures at Harvard University in 983–84 (published as "Working Space" in 986), to challenge the received doctrines of nonrepresentational art since the early 1960s. A former groundbreaking foot soldier for flat painting, Stella revealed his preoccupation with the radical Baroque compositions of Caravaggio, and how abstraction, in order for it to move forward and be revitalized, needed to deal with real, projected space. For better or worse, Stella's massive spatial conundrums have led the way to a renewed energy in abstract painting in general, to the point where most painters working today would not impose upon themselves any limitations on the kinds of space and imagery they are inclined to employ.

The connection between Sheinkman and Stella has to do with both pictorial space and painted surface. From the mid-1970s, Stella activated the surfaces of his metal protractor shapes as a means of creating a tension between agitated drawing (as in graffiti) and real, three-dimensional space. For Sheinkman, the impulse was to work off the idea of a grid, as in, for example, *Thirty Foot Drawing* (1996), and break out of the structure with vertical lines that were altered horizontally with erasure. This process, which evolved slowly and methodically, resulted in a graphic statement that was both spontaneous and systematic. At the same time, Sheinkman was pushing the restrictions of the two-dimensional plane with *Sixteen Foot Drawing, more or less* (995), 5. 97 (997), and 5.2.97 (997), in which each piece was rolled at the end of the paper the lines continuing past the edge of the paper even extending to the back, adding another spatial "illusion" to the mix. This work was followed by a series of scrolls and cylinders that, as images, were simultaneously continuous and fragmented. At the time, these structures represented Sheinkman's most elaborate incursion into (as Stella defined it) "real

7 1.2004, 2004

5.30.2004, 2004

space," despite the fact that his drawn and painted line had remained essentially flat.

In the late 990s, Sheinkman returned to the traditional picture plane, though his explorations of 3-D space would continue to influence his subsequent work. He persisted in his use of linear structures, sequences of vertical or horizontal lines in a densely marked and often shallow space, culminating in his mural *One Thousand Lines* (200) for Bear Stearns & Co. The surface of the mural, a deep orange, literally vibrates like an expanding and contracting grid. For this viewer these works resemble variations on an electrocardiogram, an interpretation reinforced by the blood-red color of some of these paintings. Sheinkman was, in effect, simulating a machine-generated image, only to contradict such an assumption with the rigorous handling of the paintings' surface.

Sheinkman has taken up the challenge of the limitations set from earlier generations on the gestural as "expressionist" and the similar pejorative connotations associated with geometric abstraction as dated, appropriational,

or worse. His paintings are cumulative manifestations of his working process: a slow, labor-intensive application of graphite mixed with oil paint; the alterations of surface by use of erasers and rags; the mysterious, alchemical manipulation of light and shadow—all contributing to the clarity and dynamism of the final image.

In his most recent work, Sheinkman has utilized a white line as if it were a light tracing in a darkened space (in fact, the artist had in the past made light drawings on photographic paper, and this represents an extension of that activity). To view these works together is to appreciate the rich charting of emotional and intellectual content that Sheinkman's art possesses. Within each work, a linear energy traverses space with a forceful grace, moving with spontaneity and exactitude. Capturing energy in motion, at various speeds and rotations, Sheinkman's line functions as a means of measuring the void. For a work of abstraction to achieve this fullness of spirit takes a unique talent to even attempt it, and Mark Sheinkman is doing just that.

Robert G. Edelman
Artist and Critic, New York

9.5.2004, 2004

Works in the Exhibition

Height precedes width. All works are courtesy of the artist and Von Lintel Gallery, New York, unless otherwise noted.

5.30.2004, 2004
oil, alkyd, graphite on canvas
48 x 72 inches
Collection of Bryan and Marilyn Lawrence, New York

6. 0.2004, 2004
oil, alkyd, graphite on canvas
72 x 48 inches

7 .2004, 2004
oil, alkyd, graphite on canvas
48 x 72 inches

9.5.2004, 2004
oil, alkyd, graphite on canvas
78 x 54 inches

9.25.2004, 2004
oil, alkyd, graphite on canvas
60 x 96 inches

0.9.2004, 2004
oil, alkyd, graphite on canvas
78 x 54 inches

Images

All photos: Christopher Burke Studio

front cover· 5.30.2004 detail), 2004
above right: 6. 0.2004, 2004

Mark Sheinkman is a visiting artist at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art.

Special Thanks

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