

chance+NECESSITY



A Return to Form: **ABSTRACTION+ REGIONAL DIVERSITY**

"I want pure response in terms of human need." -Mark Rothko, in response to a question from William Seitz about formal issues in his work¹

At the end of a protean century that has often been identified with and by abstract art, the vocabulary being employed by painters working now within the lexicon of abstraction is both expansive and fluid. A gathering of such work will, by definition, be displaying a variety of approaches, albeit from a region of the country (the Washington-Baltimore axis) with a strong, flavorful history that has recently enjoyed somewhat of a revival (i.e., Emmerich's show, *The Green Mountain Boys*).

The notion of regionalism, as viewed in the US, has been suspect at least since the days of Thomas Hart Benton, but like a local cuisine, the appeal of a regional flavor can come with time (and some good PR). The Washington Color School had the advantage of a relentless crusader who understood that one could bear witness to (art) history being made, if a strong case could be made with enough intellectual rigor for its importance. Perhaps fortunately for artists, as well as their admirers and detractors, there is no single Greenbergian promoter guiding us through the maze of methods and systems currently in operation among painters, so that we are free to experience this panoply of approaches without an interpreter. The hope would be at this point that neither the demise of painting nor its resurrection is at issue, but that painting now maintains a niche within an

embattled and sometimes indifferent culture that allows for, even encourages, multiplicity and experimentation.

As with much painting since the late 70's, the line between abstraction and methods of representation continues to be blurred. In some almost predictable and inevitable way, the dramatic divide between these two modes of painting has been breached, for the mutual benefit of both. If there is a curious affirmation in the example of Gerhard Richter's parallel stylistic worlds, it might be that the ingredients of each, the visceral pleasures of color and gesture, and the appeal of the timeless, photo-derived and out-of-focus images, in their very calculated separateness, seem like an intellectual, if stimulating, exercise in forced segregation. It's as though the narrowing of this century's hour glass (attributable to purist spirits such as Kandinsky, Mondrian, Albers and Reinhardt), culminating at mid-point with Pollock's raw but controlled energy, has emerged from its reductivist phase to be (to borrow a PC term) more inclusive; less about taking things out than putting them in.

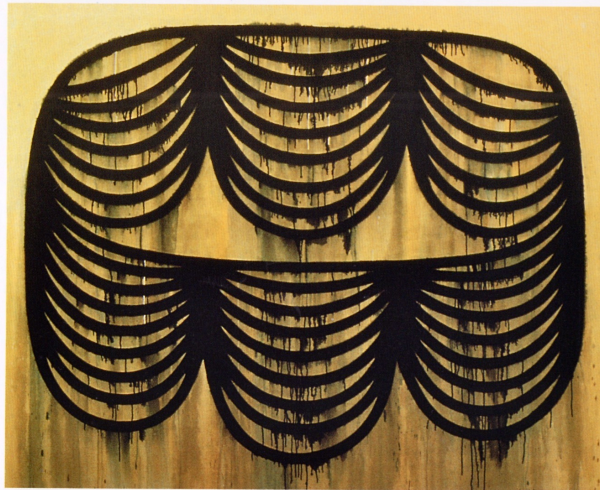
It would be shortsighted to contend that the painters in this exhibition share a common, regionally-based blueprint for their work, other than a non-objective approach to its making. Yet even that notion can be questioned, since so much recent abstraction deals with image, its sources and transformation in painterly terms. In any case, abstract painting has always been, and continues to develop, as an international language, its mutabil-

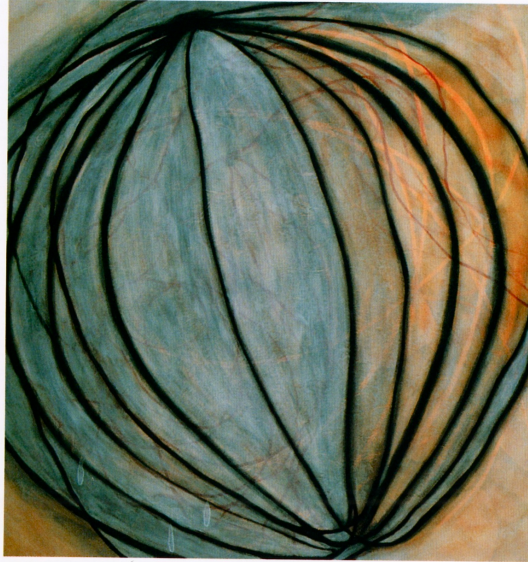
ity being one of its distinctive strengths. Far from exhausting its potential, the current directions being explored within abstract painting (post-post painterly, neo-digital-formalist, etc.) have less to do with radical departures or art historical breakthroughs than they do with a certain probity and a tendency toward the personal or idiosyncratic.

If the work in this exhibition can be said to have underlying commonality, it would be that its diversity offers subtle variations on themes within abstract painting in recent years. Formalism is given a softer image, a general makeover; the grid is dissembled,

recalled as a former friend, fondly remembered. Much of the work here displays an affinity for direct, if intricate, statement. Color is used (in most cases) sparingly, its purpose is often to differentiate between identical modules within a regulated structure. If anything, information is doled out slowly, methodically. Commentary (ironic or parodic) is kept to a minimum; dialogue is encouraged, careful attention demanded.

One linkage could be described as a layered, overall painterliness, with either an atmospheric or flat ground, usually dense and monochromatic, often with veiled information hidden just





MICHAEL WEISS, 1998, *Exogene*, 49" x 46", oil on canvas

beneath or within the surface. Rooted in Minimalism, and to a lesser degree Color-Field painting, this approach to structuring space can seem both extemporaneous and highly ordered. To greater or lesser degrees, Barbara Allen, Madeleine Keesing, Ann Rentschler, Wendy Roberts, Robin Rose and Joyce Wellman are all currently working within this mode.

What is remarkable is how distinct their work is, one from another, despite this shared quality. Allen, Keesing and Rentschler

employ (respectively) a succession of lines or stripes, small gestures and marks on an intimate scale within a large field, only to have them subsumed in a density that somehow, cumulatively, both denies and reinforces the method of their works' creation. Within their scraped and mottled surfaces, Roberts' and Wellman's paintings are replete with a subtext of images both depictive (the former) and graphic (the latter). In a similar fashion, Rose's monochrome fields are suggestive of both random processes and mathematical constructions; his surfaces are

worked over, through an obsessive excavation process, producing luminous panels of obscured data.

Paula Crawford, Christopher French, Carol Miller Frost, Tom Green, W.C. Richardson, Jo Smail and Scott Thorp all work with manifestations of the grid, though this is mostly a point of departure for further explorations of shape, proportion, weight distribution, hue juxtaposition and formal synthesis. Curiously, Frost, Richardson and Thorp each employ the circle as a basic geotectonic unit, but with contrasting results. All three play with figure/ground distinctions, and introduce seemingly random

occurrences within a geometric format. It's these subtle variances that make Frost's circles float in and out of a viewer's gaze and consciousness, or cause Richardson's unexpected sub-structural events to defy predictability. Crawford and French introduce layers of complex information that challenge our ability to "read" them, whereas Green and Smail purposely simplify their compositional devices for accessibility (suggesting, in turn, stone walls and quilt patterns), though their hand-made quality helps them to elude facile interpretations.

The final group, including Timothy App, Steve Cushner, Don

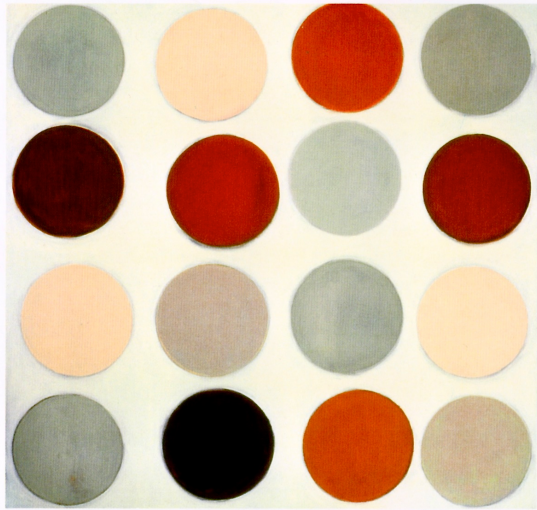




W.C. RICHARDSON, 1998, *Simple Rules*, 77" x 77", oil & alkyd resin on canvas

Kimes, Jae Ko, Sam Gilliam, William Willis and Michael Weiss, all work with flexible, elemental forms, both geometric and organic. App, Gilliam and Kimes deal with the dynamic of the rectangle, establishing their paintings' internal architecture, and what tension can be generated on the inside and outside of the

support. Gilliam's constructions are an extension of the draped painted canvas of his earlier years, only now pigment and shape are solidified into complex spatial arrangements in which color either supports or contradicts form. Organic shapes in the paintings of Cushner and Weiss mimic nature in distinct ways, though



CAROL MILLER FROST, 1998, *Sweet Nothings*, 67" x 65", oil on panel

both look to reduce it to simple iconic images. Willis' forms also evoke nature, but are enhanced with discreet art historical and literary references. Jae Ko's dark circular paintings look almost elliptical, made from rolls of paper that appear to be rotating at high speeds. As with the other work in this exhibition, illusionism, what there is of it, serves poetic rather than a descriptive purpose.

For abstract painting to survive as a creative vehicle into its second century, it must continue to grow and evolve. The artists included in this exhibition convince us with their work that such a

continuity is still possible, even offering something with promise that many discounted decades ago. We can only look forward with restless anticipation.

Robert G. Edelman

¹ Jeffrey Weiss. Mark Rothko, exhibition catalogue, The National Gallery of Art, 1998, page 303 (see Rothko interview, 22 January 1952, William Seitz papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC, (box 15) ■