

▶ Art

A DELICATE
BALANCE

By Mark Moffett

On the Nature of the Abstract

James Zunk, Iain Machell

and Susan Hartung

Ted Gallery, through July 22

HAVING GROWN TO VIEW

abstract as hopelessly intractable, humming somewhere between two or three blades of grass, I was mildly taken aback. I was surprised to find a tastefully gathered exhibit displaying the complementary sensibilities of three artists working in specific modes of studied delicacy. What kind of abstraction is this? Is it of the benign variety, in that it does not raise any of the too-familiar questions like: Why abstraction? What is the nature of abstraction? What can abstraction possibly mean these days? "An abstract painting? . . . Yes. Someone should definitely try to do that sometime . . ."

The works of Zunk, Machell and Hartung simply go about their business. And work like this can be a gentle reminder of one of the now nearly lost meanings of "art": skill, intelligence in execution, refinement of technique beyond craft, the apparently effortless creation of marvels.

But instead of abstraction, could we call it—formal impressionism?

Susan Hartung practices a type of grid-oriented serialism. This approach is stated simply in the two handsome paintings *Flats* and *Front*, with their straightforward grids and the soft undulations of buff and white between interstices. What makes grid serialism interesting is the process by which it is built. It is very much like a game of chess, involving a limited set of variables that interact as form and content, and which are made responsive through the repeated act of individual touches; the surface grows in sensitivity as the accumulating individual touches, no matter how they could try to be similar, always prove distinct from each other. (Naturally, these touches can be handled to be more or less similar, but there is a formula born of this process: the more you try to do something exactly the same, the more you get the exact rate of change.)

Done well, the apparent redundancy can take on the petaled essence of a flower. In several other works, especially in the *Notations*, Hartung exhibits something of a reverse-grid concern. The dance of idiosyncratic pencil marks seems both at

once: the regimenting ingredient, and the soft touch locked in space. Hartung is most successful when the work steers free of color; the few tight paintings in color have a homogenous stamp that defies even the shortest attention span.

Mother Jones goes origami? James Zunk's work is hard to classify but feels familiar. Somewhat decorative by design, these pretty, esoteric worlds are fashioned to seduce any eye. But with dense aggregates of fresh watercolors oozing in and about soft pleats, quiet layerings, dovetail fan-outs, they also radiate the energy of elaborate construction and manipulation without always "taking off." They seem a bit pat, a bit unsecretive, and the eye soon wearies of their sustained vigor and wallflower-behind-glass stasis. It might have something to do with Zunk's relentlessly compressive color schemes, which, although assiduously wrought to approximate fair patches of near-marbled geo-plasma, often seem unintegral to the subtle dynamics of light and shade made possible by low relief.

They could use a sharper focus—like a bold dash of plum acknowledging a pleat—to make the structure seem less after-the-fact.

This is not the case, however, with a work like *Potic Pond*. Here, working on a flat page, Zunk attains a deep level of organic intoxication; for being less outwardly divisive, the search for inner form is pushed beyond precious mannerism into a boiling stew of crude. And when Zunk cooks, it's good gumbo.

Of the three, Iain Machell's work is the most "imagistic" or referential. In *Bombs-R-Us*, for example, the silhouette of "bombness" is plainly indicated. But, as the richly blended surface suggests, the

piece could also double as a tribal shield—or a cigar, as the doctor said. Both sculptor and painter, Machell excels in the study of visual contradiction. Not so much with images, but with a variety of convincing patinas. That which looks made-of-steel is actually paper-thin and empty. And just when you second-guess everything, a piece that looks like solid steel is just that. The transmutability is at its most poetic in the quiet, cocoonlike wall clingers of the *In Memoriam* series. Machell's titles are chatty, and some are trite, as with *I Know You're in There, This One's for You and Just What You Wanted*. A few spears and I'd have made up my own title, "Primitive Swank."

This is a decidedly pretty show. It's squeaky-clean and professional but not entirely antiseptic. Each artist has a few works that catch fire, and those are pretty good odds. ■