

The Sun

"Addressing Liberty Without Literality"

By STEPHEN MAINE August 2, 2007

The relevance to contemporary life of reductivist abstraction, exemplified by Piet Mondrian, Ad Reinhardt, and Donald Judd, has been contested bitterly for decades, but its allure is so strong that many painters continue to work in opposition to it. This phenomenon was faced squarely in shows such as "Vernacular Abstraction" at the Wacoal Art Center in Tokyo in the mid-1980s, and "Critiques of Pure Abstraction," a traveling show organized by Independent Curators Incorporated and Mark Rosenthal, which traveled to several North American venues in the mid-1990s. As these exhibitions demonstrated, abstract painting in the postmodern period was reinvigorated by the infusion of forms, textures, and structures derived from other disciplines, including photography, pop culture, the sciences, and critical theory. The dozen young and youngish painters in "Late Liberties," a lively show at John Connelly Presents, have digested this critical approach to abstraction, and made it their standard operating procedure.

"Late Liberties" is curated by Augusto Arbizo, a painter who is also a curator at Greenberg Van Doren Gallery. All the work is dated 2007, making the show a snapshot of abstraction's current, unabashedly impure period. The undulating, anthropomorphic forms of Carrie Moyer's "Numina," and its interplay of brilliant veils of acrylic glazes and glitter, are much in the spirit of her recent solo show at Canada, on the Lower East Side. Derived from sources such as prehistorical artifacts and political graphics, Ms. Moyer's vessels and Venuses are partially disguised through superimposition, and attain a surprising weightlessness.

Dana Frankfort is interested in the visceral weight of hand-lettering. In "GUTS," that four-letter word rendered in brushy gold paint stretches across a 5-foot square expanse of blazing yellow. The painting, despite its immediate impact, seems a bit perfunctory compared to many other canvases by this logocentric artist.

Michael Zahn works with motifs familiar from the computer interface, locating reductive abstraction in that most utilitarian area of design. Four overlapping slabs resembling enormous "stickies" in moss green, butter yellow, powder blue, and flamingopink, march off the wall in "in and out (not up and down)." Mr. Zahn's work comically updates Han Hofmann's principle of "push-pull" as a means to activate pictorial space, activating the space of the room in the process.

Along with keyed-up color, the show includes a lot of black. In her large, untitled canvas, Raha Raissnia articulates a dense and complex matrix in black oil by scraping the white interstices nearly clean. Her meticulous paintings suggest networks of an unknown scale, from electronic circuitry to cities. Her touch is stiff and she doesn't seem to enjoy paint, but the elaborately developed interchange of figure and ground is impressive. **Wendy White's** rollicking, gutsy canvases have for some time relied on a range of blacks as a foil for jittery primary and secondary hues. She incorporates sculptural gestures into her painting; "nevercracked/ roomy" sports a pair of soccer balls suspended in front of the painting's surface by means of steel pipes attached to the gallery walls.

Among these New Yorkers, the West Coast is represented by Kim Fisher, who works in Los Angeles, and by San Francisco-based Tauba Auerbach. Ms. Fisher's hardedge, crystalline imagery alludes to the light-jumbling qualities of gemstones. The smoothly interlocking facets of "Damaged (pink)," in a range of pinks, purples, and magentas, are qualified by scraped, sprayed, splashed, and stenciled paint. A fringe of canvas, splayed outward from the stretcher rather than properly tucked behind, provides a nicely contrasting tactility. Ms. Auerbach's primary reference is typography, as in the ink-on-paper "L," in which an impossibly ornate display-type L unfurls like an exotic headdress. Helvetica has its day in Ms. Auerbach's "Ready or Not or Ready and Not," wherein the artist layers the letters of that title, in vibrant gouache on black paper. It feels like a familiar device, but the piece is a neatly choreographed encounter between linguistic legibility and pure opticality.

Solid efforts by Elizabeth Neel, Daniel Hesidence, Alex Kwartler, and Jeff Elrod round out the show. Mr. Arbizo provides the viewer with an update on his own painting, in which he has moved away from his overtly landscape-based work of a few years ago. "Rorschach (green + black)" features a symmetrical, distinctly skeletal arabesque in black enamel that floats on a canvas stained in acrylic in a range of greens. In addition to its obvious connection to psychiatry, the painting recalls the dozens of "Rorschach Paintings" Andy Warhol produced in 1984. Flexible indeed are the parameters of an abstract practice that would count among its referents the Prince of Pop.