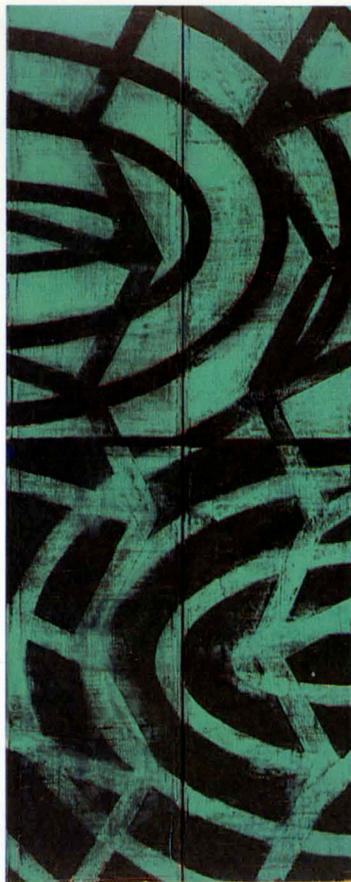


Composed of two canvases, there is a painting by David Row called *Sound* with images that seem to mirror each other in perfect symmetry. Painted in gray on a yellow ground on the left are two sets of chevrons over a large oval. Half of the chevrons point up and half point down, creating a diamond shape in the center between them. The right canvas shows the same configuration, except this time in black on a gray ground. While superficially calm and harmonious, a forbidding quality in the two images hints at a dehumanized aggression. They are a little like fencer's masks or the helmets of ancient Japanese warriors, but what really matters in this painting, what makes it a good introduction into Row's oeuvre, is what happens in the fraction of an inch just to the left of center. Row has allowed the black on gray of the right panel to extend just slightly beyond the abutment line so that the painting is given two possible centers. Through this simple maneuver, which is at once obvious and subtle, Row has dramatically increased the vibrancy of a potentially static painting. It is to his further credit that he has not drafted this device into service in other paintings, so that it remains a discovery here, rather than a mere trick.

If the reader will bear with us for a few moments, we would like to describe another of Row's paintings. *Vert de Grèce*, painted in green and black during 1987, again uses abutted canvases, and again the division of the canvases is vertical and centered. There is, however, a second horizontal division indicated by the paint alone. The top and bottom halves of the painting have a doubly reversed relationship: black on green versus green on black, and left to right versus right to left. Thus, on the top half we see four elliptical black arcs with the convex side pointing to the right, and on the bottom half four similar arcs in green pointing to the left. The arcs appear as four concentric ellipses that have been cropped, but the longest arc of both the upper and lower halves meets at the center of the canvas—where the vertical and horizontal divisions cross—to form a reversed "s" shape. As the only line moving unbroken throughout the painting, this "s" creates a circuit to move the eye up through the painting and back around again.

The arcs are organized accord-



ing to an axial symmetry (what is on the left above is on the right below), which is more dynamic and less blatant than bilateral symmetry. Running vertically along the left and right edges of the work is an angular latticework, a motif that appears in other of Row's paintings, e.g. *Bias* (1986) and is derived from Brancusi's *Endless Column*. In this case he has cropped the latticework columns in half, so that the eye wants the work to extend to the right and left in order to complete the design. Although the two columns mirror each other, one side has been shifted up a half step, suggesting the possibility of their fitting together. By now you will have begun to see the possibility for perceptual confusion in this painting. As the zigzag edge of the column marches up the canvas in a double-time staccato relative to the fluid movement of the "s" curve, there are moments when the zigs (or the zags) follow the direction of the arcs and others when they cross the arcs perpendicularly. One tries to separate the two elements, to see the arcs without the columns or vice versa, and then to put them together in a consistent manner, but it's difficult. The arcs appear flat, on a single plane, while the columns seem to exist in an illusionistic space, but as one follows a zig it can penetrate the plane of the elliptical

David Row, *Vert de Grèce*, 1987. *Oil and wax on canvas, 80 x 32"*. Courtesy John Good Gallery.

DAVID ROW

arcs, making them into a spiral which then snaps back into flatness. In addition there is the confusion of positive and negative. The black lines at the top appear solid on the atmospheric green ground, while at the bottom the lines seem to have been cut out of a black solid to reveal the green behind. In both halves the green is a continuous atmosphere behind the black. The top half pushes forward somewhat aggressively, while the bottom recedes. There is no moment of repose in this canvas. Rigorously organized and resolved, it speaks of restlessness and unceasing movement, of endlessness and infinity.

But Row's is not a serene infinity. In spirit, his work is closer to the prisons of Piranesi than to the meditations of Newman. If he uses geometry and color to suggest endlessness, it is the endlessness of restriction rather than freedom, of a fortified border stretching from horizon to horizon rather than the limitless sky beyond it. They are the dark side of the sublime.

Certain of Row's paintings such as *Bias* and *Akros* have a peculiarly postwar feel, not in the sense that they recall the late '40s, but in more general terms. They suggest a background of devastated cities and food shortages; they suggest an exhausted populace with minds haunted and dulled by war and deprivation, perhaps now driven by a black-

ened, infinitesimal seed of hope to start rebuilding with the debris left behind. Other artists have created their work from some imposed or willed zero degree of the imagination. The Minimalists come to mind most readily, though Beuys and the adherents of *Arte Povera* would also suit the bill. What Row brings to the stripped-down aesthetic of building from the ruins is an unassuming complexity and a rather elegant elegiac tone. His paintings prove that the basic need not be basic and the gloomy not necessarily gloomy.

Perhaps it's worthwhile asking what the link is, if any, between crisis and abstraction? Why does Row's geometry strike us as a natural response to threat? In *Sense of Order*, E.H. Gombrich makes the following observation: "What Worringer calls empathy, the identification with natural forces, is to him a comparatively late product of civilization and this accounts for the peculiarity of Greek and classical art. It manifests an exceptional confidence, because most cultures live in dread of nature and resort to magic and spells to placate its mysterious forces. Abstraction in all the arts is a symptom of this anxiety, an anxiety with which the twentieth century has again become acquainted." Yes, except it is not nature which we dread but what we have done with it.

The painter, free in the sanctuary of his studio to devote himself to the absorbing discipline of his art, seems perfectly situated to avoid dread. A formal imagination at work suggests escape, beauty, and resolution, a hermetic and private universe, a world that is self-generated, self-sufficient, harmonious, but with David Row such solitude is not sanctuary. His is not a red studio, but one somewhere between dark blue and black. If Matisse blossomed in the bright light of noon, Row prefers twilight, the hour the French call *entre chien et loup*, between dog and wolf. It's as if his paintings seek to placate the forces of night—and this is emphatically an urban night, the "burn-out end of a smoky day"—with the magic of ambiguity and the spells of clarity. For all their formalist claims, which are considerable, his paintings also possess a talismanic intensity that is rare among today's geometers. (John Good, *April 10-May 9*)

Meyer Raphael Rubinstein and Daniel Wiener