

ARTnews

DAVID ROW

John Good

There are many who believe that abstraction has run its course, has exhausted its ideas and myths. So it is something of an achievement when a young abstract artist comes along and, in a climate of disbelief, pieces together the shopworn devices of geometric painting to make important-looking art. David Row's waxy, austere-colored canvases quietly draw the viewer into a delicate web of oppositions—between surface and spatial illusion, balance and tension, light and matter, object and image.

By suppressing color (the paintings are either white on white, black on black, or black on white), Row spotlights his structural moves, which at first glance look simple. Thick, flat bands bent into ovoid and chevron shapes overlap to form lattice- or maze-like structures reminiscent of Valerie Jaudon's. Although compressed into a single plane, these patterns threaten to break into their constituent parts. Their flatness only masks an underlying spatial complexity. In addition, the predominant close-valued-tone-on-tone motif cloaks Row's labyrinths in an atmosphere of light that suggests depth. Here, color (created by translucent layers of variously tinted wax) makes space, while pattern, however structurally unstable, forms a grill blocking or screening that space.

Row squeezes additional drama from apparently simple means by setting up then denying expectations for symmetry and predictable continuity. Initially, his patterns look uniform and symmetrical—calm, meditative designs analogous to, say, mandalas—but they are cropped and split in disconcerting ways by the paintings' edges. Because Row uses a diptych format, in which patterns continue from one panel to the next but the colors of figure and ground are reversed, he can create compositional tensions without undermining the overall



David Row, *Untitled*, 1989, oil and wax on canvas, 64 by 40 inches. John Good.

structural logic.

With a single, exquisitely simple maneuver, Row transforms a vertical, untitled work into a disquieting puzzle. The gap between the two panels is just wide enough to prevent the simultaneous viewing of both canvases. In order to gain a sense of a whole—to put the split structure together again—the viewer's gaze must continuously shift from one panel to the other. When one looks at the right side, the left slips from view and vice versa. For Row unity is achieved through a dynamic process that involves the active participation of the viewer.

Row's refined interplay of opposites and love of dynamic equilibrium recall Mondrian. In the tradition of the best abstract painting, Row may be attempting to plastically render ideas about the structure of reality. Such ambition, coupled with a profound respect for the language of painting, may be what it takes to rekindle a belief in abstraction.

—Nancy Grimes