

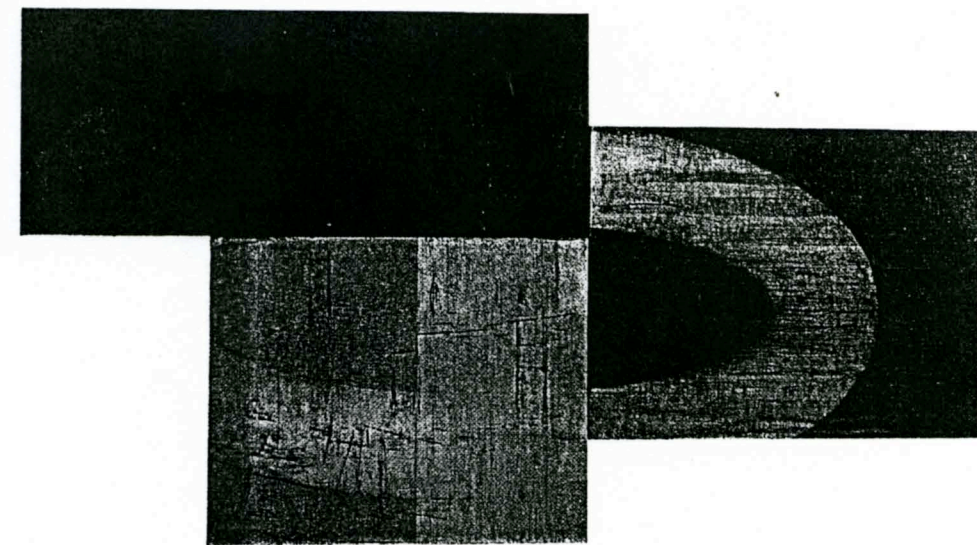
David Row

But we no longer thought it could be done without Marcelle, whose piercing cries kept grating our ears, for they were linked to our most violent desires.

—Georges Bataille, *Story of The Eye*

Someone once described Ingmar Bergman's film *Persona* as a meditation on the numbers one and two—an excessively formalistic account of that particular work, no doubt. On the other hand it would seem perfectly felicitous to call Brice Marden's *Grove Series*, recently at Gagosian, a meditation on the numbers one, two, and three, for the way the series shows the highly nuanced unity of the monochrome dissecting itself into combinations of two and three panels, the same combinations folding themselves back into the one. Marden's Romantic precursor Caspar David Friedrich, as seen in a small exhibition at the Met, often showed pairs of figures, hand in hand, gazing into the void: a similar meditation on the possibility of separate identities overcoming themselves through a shared concentration on a third entity—whether this is to be understood as pantheistic Nature, or perhaps simply the impalpable dark luminosity that is the painting itself.

David Row's new paintings as well are meditations on the numbers one, two, and three. Up until now, his typical format has been the diptych, but there is only one of them in this exhibition and that is clearly a holdover from a previous stage in the work. Otherwise the new paintings are in three sections (I hesitate to call them triptychs, which would seem to imply a unity that the paintings themselves question), and this change in format has brought with it a thoroughgoing transformation in every aspect of Row's work. His use of the diptych had always implied a certain sense of balance, a classical reserve. Color was always subordinated to design—



David Row, *Theta*, 1991, Oil and wax on canvas, 91" x 164". Courtesy John Good Gallery.

so much so that Row's previous New York show was of basically black-and-white paintings. Although the paintings were never less than intelligent and well-made, there was something a bit cautious about them, something prematurely mature. All this has changed now. The three-panel format has taken Row away from the careful reciprocation of equal forces and pushed him into a bolder and edgier play with imbalance, fragmentation, and arbitrariness. The color that was previously latent is here emphatic, and composition now seems to have more to do with eliciting coloristic effects than vice versa. These are paintings for which sensation has become urgent, and I think Row has learned something about color as sensation from the work of David Reed, and perhaps also from another artist who recently showed at Good, Karsten Wittke. In any case, these are paintings in which, as Row recently remarked, "Color can consume anything." That verb is important: in this work, color desires and devours. It can also repulse, as in *Tropicana*, where from a distance the tone seems cool and decorative but becomes almost painful—toxic, I heard someone call it—as you get close. Elsewhere, in *Gridlock*, the effect is like that of rusting steel showing through scraped automotive enamel (actually the media are oil and wax) but with that metallic texture somehow transmuted into flesh.

But beyond sensation as such, these paintings tell stories about color, stories filled with incident and novelistic detail in which colors seek each other out, exchange identities, grow moody, quarrel, expire. The three-panel format even evokes the literary struc-

ture that René Girard (in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 1961; English translation, 1965) identified as "triangular desire": the desire of one character for another is always mediated by the real or imagined desire of a third. In these paintings, each panel appears to seek its completion, to make good its lack, by joining itself to the fragmentation of another; but (the words are Jacques Lacan's) "what the one lacks is not what is hidden in the other," and to the extent that a complete structure is attained, it is only because of the troubling presence of a third panel, which is also attempting to use the other to complete itself in a wholly different way. Perhaps it is for this reason that in many of the paintings here, one panel is more or less monochrome—in any case without the simple but strong horizontals, verticals, or oblate arcs that elsewhere impose themselves on the panels' fields; these "allover" panels seem particularly endowed with a kind of latency that allows them to shift their identities to accommodate the conflicting demands of the more graphically aggressive panels.

Row's accomplishment here is that, working directly in the self-referential or literalist tradition of the American painting of the '60s (Marden, but also Frank Stella, Al Held, and Larry Poons are all relevant), he has managed to broach this charged psychological terrain. In doing so he is helping to reinvent abstract painting for an audience to whom the literal self-presence of the object has become inadequate, but which would find an allegorical lamination of meaning irritatingly heavy-handed. (*John Good*, February 14–March 23) Barry Schwabsky