

# NEW ART examiner

**PHOTOGRAPHY** IN FOCUS AT THE WALKER  
BULKA ON CHICAGO'S **ARTISTS ANONYMOUS**  
"SPEAKEASY" LAYS **REGIONAL ASSUMPTION** TO REST  
KRANTZ ON **"RECLAIMING THE SYMBOL"**  
**RADICE'S VETO**, AEROSMITH'S REDRESS IN "NEWSBRIEFS"

# NEGOTIATING

# NEW

A CONSCIOUS AFFIRMATION  
—by Mary Murphy

# ABSTRACTION



# Consciousness in the abstract

by MARY MURPHY

Much to do has been made recently about art's response to politics. The source of what has been called contemporary "political art" can be traced to the extreme conservatism of government policy in the '80s which precipitated a radical response in the art world. This response has emphasized more direct and dramatic art forms, such as performance and installation art, which often make political realities (abortion, AIDS, the environment, war, racism) their subject. In such a climate, abstract painting is often perceived as irrelevant, elitist, or worse, simply dead. Yet by incorporating a different time element than either performance or installation art, abstraction can access less topical political realities, such as consciousness, in a different manner. Consciousness in this broader sense is not merely knowledge of a fact, but rather a state of being which is characterized by sensation, emotion, volition, and thought. Abstraction emphasizes these elements by indulging our visual, mental, and tactile capacities. Therefore, it is no accident that even as the attention this season has seemed to focus on the more overtly "political" aspects of much current work, a simultaneous conversation about abstract painting has been taking place.

The current conversation about "The New Abstraction" has been reflected in several important exhibitions in New York this season, including the "Conceptual Abstraction" show at Sidney Janis Gallery, which acknowledged areas of reference (language, narration, illusion) that challenge abstraction's interpretation as an art of pure form; and "La Metafisica della Luce" ("The Metaphysics of Light"), an exhibition curated by Demetrio Paparoni for John Good Gallery. Paparoni also edits the Italian art magazine *Tema Celeste*, which has devoted

several recent issues to "The New Forms of Abstraction." These issues featured texts by prominent painters, critics, and philosophers representing a range of perspectives and highlighting current areas of interest in relation to abstract practice, including history, culture, and the various interpretations of geometry in contemporary abstraction.

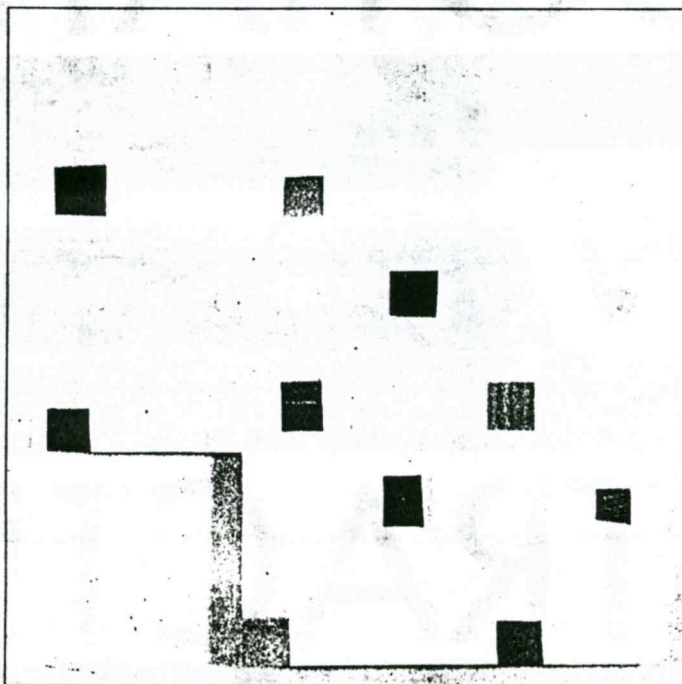
While it is certainly gratifying to see so much good abstract work being discussed,

specific themes—the continuing tradition of odd biomorphism and skewed geometry at Protetch, and the movement toward using conspicuous special effects in abstraction at White Columns. The premises in each case were modest, clearly stated, and reinforced by the selection of works and their presentation.

By contrast, at Sidney Janis the difficulty was primarily one of interpretation, as revealed in the way paintings were presented in this

show. In several instances, works seemed to be grouped by initial appearance rather than by motivating aesthetics, politics, or practice. A double-tondo grid painting by Stephan Westfall was hung next to a double-square painting of grids by Mary Heilmann, creating the impression of a superficial connection between the two painters, but avoiding any real discussion of the underlying differences in approach. Paintings by Thomas Nozkowski and Shirley Keneda, who share a predisposition for biomorphic shapes but little else in terms of motivation, were similarly paired. In the catalogue, works placed on facing pages bear a deceiving resemblance in black-and-white reproduction—a David Row with a Peter Halley, a Valerie Jaudon with a Philip Taaffe, and, in perhaps the most unfortunate juxtaposition, a painted wood panel by Sherrie Levine with a process-oriented painting by John Zinsser.

While it may be true that both Levine and Zinsser are concerned with sensuality, their respective conceptions of it are as different as night and day: Levine prefers a more restrained physicality and the content of her work ultimately derives from its play off of earlier Modernist art, as expressed in titles such as *Meltdown (After Mondrian: 1)*. Zinsser, however, derives both content and imagery from the play between materials and automatism. I had the feeling these catalogue juxtapositions were made with an eye to how



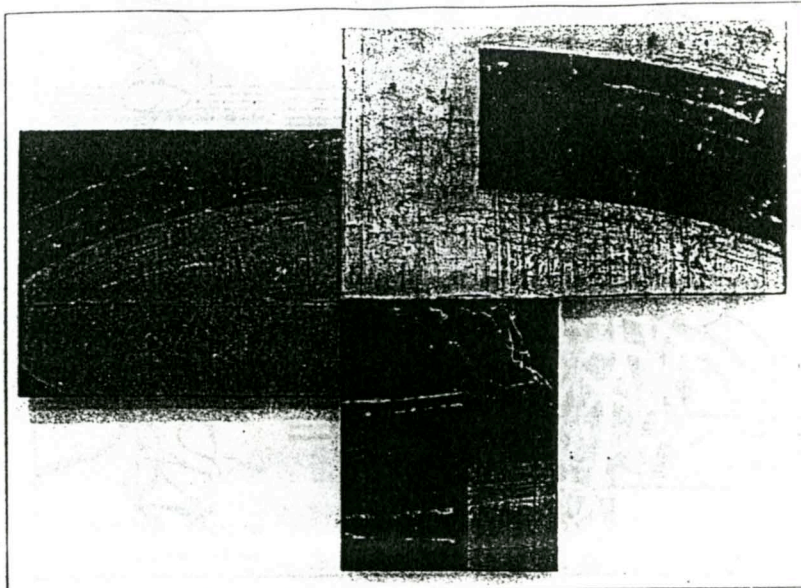
MARY HEILMANN, "Bouquet," oil on canvas, 42" x 42", 1992.  
Photo courtesy of Pat Hearn Gallery.

these forums were not without their problems. In general, the shows tended toward large surveys with inadequate explication given to particular aspects of current practice. The result was a lack of clarity concerning important emerging themes, as well as an inclusiveness which, given the current climate, could do abstraction more harm than good. Two notable exceptions to this scenario were "Stubborn Painting" at Max Protetch and "In Full Effect" curated by Bill Arning for White Columns. Both were small shows which concentrated on

the work would look in reproduction—with its emphasis on graphic image and its disregard of surface—making the works appear to be more alike than they actually are.

“Conceptual Abstraction” was never adequately defined within the context of this show, nor was the real diversity of current approaches addressed. The idea of “conceptual painting” in the exhibit was so loose as to include painters such as Nozkowski and Westfall, whose paintings accept the self-referential, formal premises laid down in Modernism, as well as artists such as Levine and Christian Eckart, whose work questions Modernist ideas of originality and subjectivity. By failing to elucidate underlying motivations, this show ultimately ignored important connections and meaningful diversity among artists who are dealing with similar issues from a variety of perspectives, and instead substituted false relationships between artists with widely divergent concerns, creating a meaningless diversity.

The show which Paparoni curated at John Good revealed a similar problem: the failure to adequately define the theme (“The Metaphysics of Light”) and consequently, the absence of critical distinction concerning its various uses in contemporary abstraction. In the accompanying catalogue essay, Paparoni divided the participating artists into two groups based on their attitudes toward history, concluding that “The two groups . . . are linked by the way in which light is manifested in their works.” The conclusion one might draw from this is that light functioned in much the same way from painting to painting throughout the show—an assertion which fortunately was not borne out by the work itself. In fact, the paintings on view comprised several important schools of thought regarding light in abstraction. For example, one could have highlighted the work of painters included here such as Gerhard Richter (represented by a recent abstract painting), Jonathan Lasker, Lydia Dona, David Reed, Stephen Ellis, and Peter Halley, who refer to modern techno-culture through their use of light. Conversely, one could have addressed the continuing presence of romantic or symbolist light in abstraction as found in the work of participating artists Ross Bleckner, Richmond Burton, Nancy Haynes, Per Kirkeby, and Domenicho Bianchi. (Gary Stephan could be seen in this context as someone who straddles both worlds, using a romantic light with a technological spin.) But the failure to identify, compare, or contrast these trends, or



DAVID ROW, “Untitled,” oil and wax on canvas, 40” x 56”, 1991. Photo courtesy of John Good Gallery.

to provide a context for the specific works in the show, left one feeling that this became more an opportunity for Paparoni to assemble some paintings he liked than an exploration of an important aspect of contemporary abstraction.

Paparoni’s catalogue essay discusses other timely issues in abstraction, specifically his conceptions of geometry and history. He

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acknowledges the movement from a paradigm based on the unconscious (in Abstract Expressionism) to one based on consciousness, but he feels the new painting mimics “linguistic analysis” because it arises through consciousness and is therefore rational. According to Paparoni, Abstract Expressionism was dictated by randomness and chance, while the new abstraction is “predictable” and characterized by control. For Paparoni, this predictability of the linguistic model is reflected in the emphasis on geometry in current abstract painting. Paparoni’s dialectical argument confuses “chaos” with the unconscious and equates

geometry with control, neglecting its function as a vehicle for the contemporary reexamination of aspects of Modernism, as found in the work of painters as diverse as Heilmann and Row. Furthermore, Paparoni’s argument views consciousness through a linguistic model which is exclusively conceptual, rather than seeing consciousness as inherently conceptual as well as physical, a point well defined in Diane Ackerman’s recent book, *A Natural History of the Senses*:

To begin to understand the gorgeous fever that is consciousness, we must try to understand the senses . . . . To

understand, we have to “use our heads,” meaning our minds . . . the latest findings in physiology suggest that *the mind* doesn’t really dwell in the brain but travels the whole body on caravans of hormone and enzyme, busily making sense of the compound wonders we catalogue as touch, taste, smell, hearing, vision.<sup>1</sup>

Consciousness can thus be seen as a physical, as well as a mental, process. Furthermore, the linguistic model on which much contemporary abstraction relies is inherently social, and not merely rational; in *Belonging to the Universe*, the physicist Fritjof Capra notes the origin of consciousness in the social necessity for language:

The whole realm of self-awareness and consciousness arises through language . . . [the scientist Humberto] Maturana says that consciousness is essentially a social phenomenon, because it arises through language that operates in a social system. Not only can we not understand consciousness through physics and chemistry, we cannot even understand it through biology or psychology if we restrict ourselves to a single organism. You will understand consciousness when you go to the social domain.<sup>2</sup>

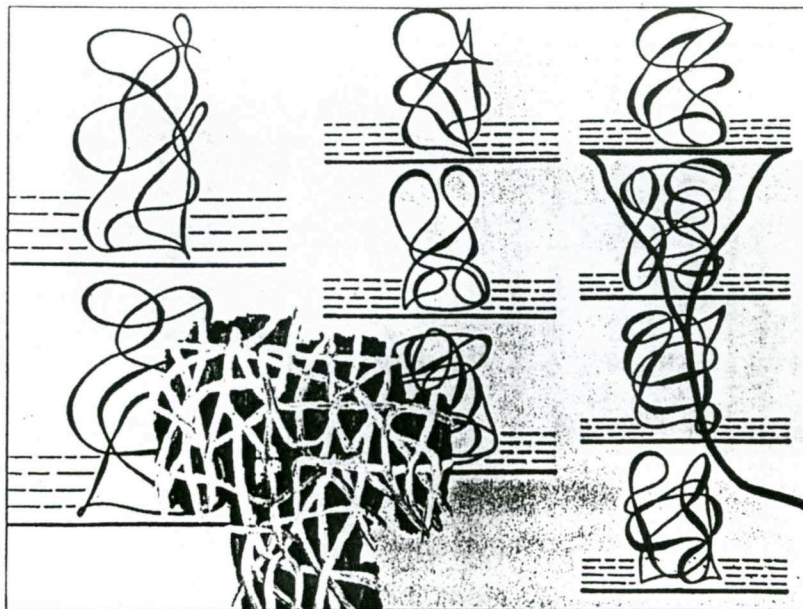
Paparoni’s failure to address the paradigm shift from unconsciousness to consciousness in a broader sense—that is, as a movement from intuitive, archetypal imagery to the represented conscious thoughts, feelings, and physicality of the viewer—leaves him unprepared to accept the more physical and social, or humanistic,

aspects of current geometric painting. A more thoughtful discussion of its use may be found in John Zinsser's article, "Geometry and its Discontents" (*Tema Celeste*, Autumn 1991). Zinsser's conclusion that "what is emerging is a growing sense of [the] primacy . . . [of] material concerns as well as . . . the emotional drive behind the work" acknowledges this movement toward a more tangible, sensual awareness in geometric abstraction.

Finally, Paparoni attempts to identify two contrasting attitudes toward history among the participating artists: one which he feels reflects a non-linear attitude toward history, and one which "finds a referent in the temporally 'dated' solutions" of art history. Paparoni seems to consider these two camps as mutually exclusive, but many artists see history not as linear, but more as a web-like network of interrelationships, and therefore utilize the formal solutions of earlier artists from various points in time. Paparoni's division produces a false dichotomy because it fails to acknowledge the current historical imperative: a plurality in which artists can utilize *both* the "temporally dated" formal solutions of art history as well as non-linear attitudes toward it in their work. For history is not simply a finite chronology of styles, but rather a continuous, complicated network of forms, structures, and relationships which occurs—and continues to occur—wherever culture exists.

Peter Halley addresses this issue in his article "Abstraction and Culture" (*Tema Celeste*, Autumn 1991). Arguing against a view of abstract painting which is based solely on its own past, Halley connects that history to patterns of abstraction in twentieth-century thought and culture. Defining abstraction as "the organization of discrete, specific incidents into more generalized, repeatable patterns," he notes similarly abstract principles in such diverse fields as economics, linguistics, modern physics, and technology as well as the visual arts. His conclusion that abstraction, rather than being merely an aesthetic phenomenon, is "simply the reality of the abstract world," reflects an attention to the interaction between art and culture which is crucial to a comprehensive understanding of the history of forms and their foundation in human experience.

Although Halley is attentive to the relationship between abstraction and society, he is noticeably silent on the relationships operating within painting itself, choosing to focus on the



JONATHAN LASKER, "Rustic Psyche," oil on canvas, 84" x 108", 1990.  
Photo courtesy of Sperone Westwater.

appearance of a work rather than the way in which it is made. In one such case, Halley limits his discussion of Barnett Newman to the artist's crisis of subject matter, using this crisis to illustrate the "alienation" of post-war abstraction. This alienation is then posited as the forbear of

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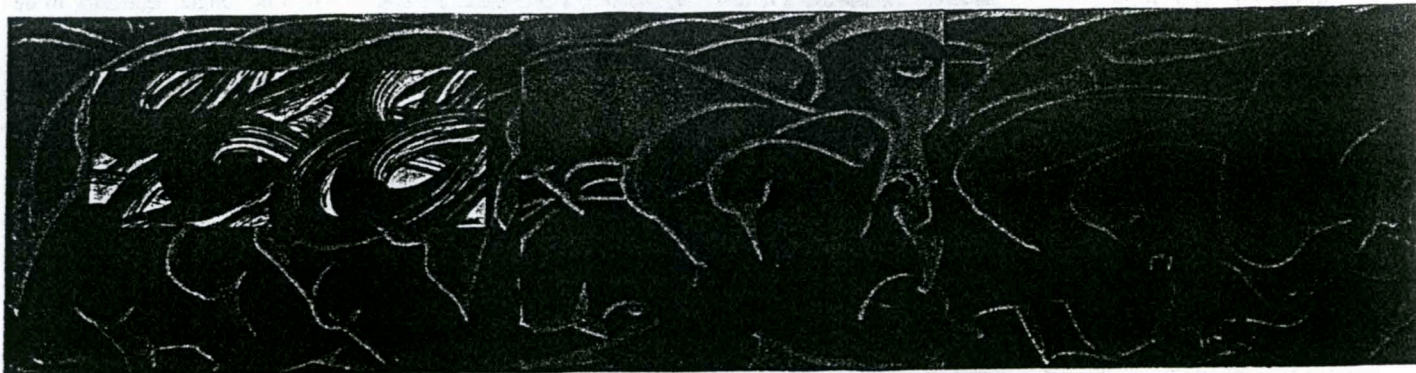
contemporary abstraction's "empty anguish": "Post-war abstraction was to be dominated by one overriding response to culture: spirituality and phenomenology were supplanted by alienation as the guiding impetus behind abstraction."

But in citing alienation as "the guiding impetus behind [post-war] abstraction," Halley divorces alienation from spirituality and phenomenology, forces which strongly influenced not only such painters as Rothko and Newman, respectively, but later movements such as Minimalism as well, and which continue

to influence aspects of contemporary abstraction (for example, the element of transcendence in Bleckner's paintings, and the understanding of the relationship between viewer and painting in Reed's work). Furthermore, avoiding a consideration of the material aspects of Newman's work allows Halley to claim that "post-war abstraction chronicles . . . the emotional blankness, emptiness, or numbness" of post-war society. For while the *appearance* of Newman's work may allude to alienation, its *structure* alleviates this by providing the viewer with a sense of place through such considerations as scale and surface. By emphasizing

appearance rather than facture, Halley avoids a technical discussion of Newman's process which would explicitly address the artist's concern for relationship rather than alienation. He is thereby able to construct a foundation for contemporary abstraction which reflects only one aspect of social reality. Halley does not allow for the use of abstraction as an antidote to the prevailing alienation by means of its technical specificity; hence his reliance on "blankness" as the underlying metaphor of post-war abstraction in general, and his consequent misreading of such artists as Stella and Ryman. Although Halley wants to see abstraction as an integral part of the social fabric, he seems unwilling to admit that meaning derives not only from image (the look of a work) but also from how images are constructed, that is, their structural as opposed to representational aspects.

This point is considered by Yve-Alain Bois in the introduction to his recent collection of essays, *Painting as Model*. For Bois, the idea of a work is discovered precisely in the specificity of the object, "not just [in] the general condition of its medium, but also its means of production in its slightest detail."<sup>3</sup> The technical specificity with which a work is made is inherently ideological for Bois; therefore, form (the shape and structure of a work) always expresses an idea. Such a view avoids the pitfall to which Halley succumbs—namely, the old conflict between form and content. According to Bois, such an argument ignores the way in which a work is made in favor of its appearance, ultimately confusing the meaning of a work with merely what it represents ("blankness," for example). Bois laments the current misplaced emphasis on sociopolitical interpretations of art, and seeks to direct the arguments surrounding politics to a reconsideration of form:



DAVID REED, "No. 288," oil and alkyd on linen, 36" x 168", 1989-90. Photo by Dennis Cowley; courtesy of Max Protetch.

No one would deny that the materialism-idealism antagonism, which is ideological, both informs and is informed by the sociopolitical, yet cannot be reduced to it. It is my contention that if one does not want to limit the relation between art and the sociopolitical to a mere question of thematic (. . . a useless dichotomy between "political" and "nonpolitical" art), it is to refine the ideological analysis that one must work (and indeed the best examples of what is called "political art" have always consisted in a deciphering of the codes and strategies of the dominant ideology—today more than ever). This implies a most special attention paid to the "history of structures, of forms," for "form is always ideological."<sup>3</sup>

Taking his cue from Roland Barthes, Bois, unlike Halley and Paporoni, sees the history of forms not merely as a history of images or referents, nor as a finite chronology of styles, but as a history of specific structures and relationships. This perspective allows for a view of abstraction in which the construction of a work is no longer distinguished from its content and in which its technical specificities can be viewed as ideological in the best sense—that is, as presenting ideas which affect our consciousness.

It is precisely this attitude toward form, along with an increased emphasis on sense perception, which characterizes the best of "The New Abstraction." These concerns are represented in various ways in the work of several painters included in both the "Conceptual Abstraction" and "La Metafisica della Luce" shows; each of the following artists combines a strong conceptual foundation with equally strong attention to the sensual and emotional aspects of painting.

The form of Bleckner's work challenges the familiar dichotomy between abstraction and representation. In the past, he has borrowed fragmented images from art history and

reused them as referents for states of feeling rather than storytelling devices, thereby releasing the image from its purely literary role and insisting on the non-self-referential foundations of painting. Bleckner does not merely appropriate images; rather, their affective context is retained. The use of hand gestures taken from El Greco's *The Burial of Count Orgaz*, for example, brings the full weight of the gestures' original sense to bear on the contemporary subject of death, forging a link between abstraction and the history of narrative painting which is based on emotional resonance. More recently (including his works in both shows discussed here), Bleckner has

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utilized images which are essentially geometric (circles) but are used in such a way as to refer to wind, stars, and other metaphysical and cosmic phenomena. The range of Bleckner's concerns is impressive, while his commitment to paint as a vehicle for the communication of emotion posits painting as a viable activity capable of addressing contemporary issues.

Lasker's paintings combine a sophisticated use of color, line, and texture with a tacit critique of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. By reproducing seemingly spontaneous and deceptively simple gestures, Lasker allows viewers to identify with them while avoiding the heroic ethos of Abstract

Expressionism; his allusion to the figure implicit in these gestures (and in the viewer's identification with them) is an attempt to subvert the non-referential dogma of Minimalism. Lasker revels in paint's juiciness, setting thick clusters of lines against areas of flatness, and utilizing a broad range of color, from pure primaries to strangely muted pastels, with a judicious use of black and white. The combination of color, painterly effects, and variously scaled images moves the viewer through the painting at various speeds, mimicking the effects of the best narrative painting, and keeping the viewer sensually alert.

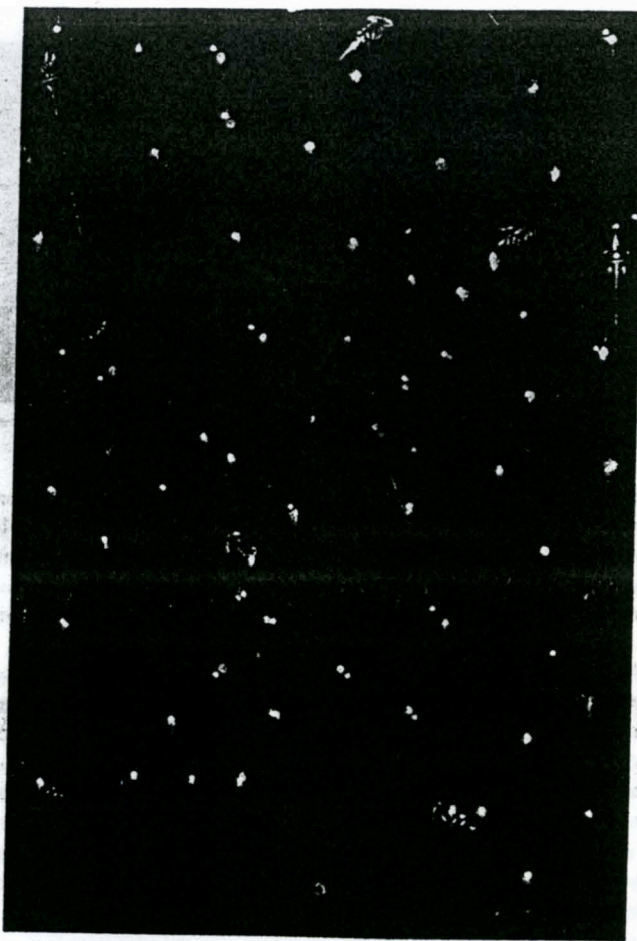
The form of Reed's paintings also reflects the reinsertion of time and movement into abstract painting. Reed's elongated formats and strategically placed compositional elements move the eye around the canvas in a dynamic tension which tests the notion of the whole as a static reality by manipulating the viewer's perception and response. In our peripheral vision we sense activity—created through changes in color or in the speed of a gesture—at the edges of the paintings. Reed's works embrace aspects of Abstract Expressionism (in their scale) and Minimalism (in their use of broad, flat areas of color) even while they simultaneously critique these movements by their qualified gestures and dynamic formats. These paintings pose new possibilities for creating illusion and maintaining the unity of the picture plane through color relationships. Sensuality is shifted from the medium itself onto light and gesture, echoing the heightened emotionality of the Baroque. Reed's paintings, like Lasker's, are resolutely abstract yet not without reference: their color alludes to the saturated, directionless light of contemporary media images, while their gestures recall the figural mannerisms of seventeenth-century Italian painting. Finally, Reed's mysteriously mute surfaces, which seem to freeze the image, mimic photography, thus raising questions about how images are constructed.

Many current abstract painters also emphasize consciousness through a re-examination of the language of geometry,

challenging the purity of the intentions behind it and finding new possibilities for its practice not only in its relation to culture, but also in its active inclusion of the viewer. This is achieved through various strategies, including an emphasis on gesture and process. The movement away from a priori forms, such as the grid of Mondrian and the Minimalists, and toward a more dynamic approach indicates a deeper shift in perspective from a faith in ultimate solutions and in systems to a more participatory response; structure is now seen as the result of an underlying process, rather than vice versa.

This emphasis on process is implicit in the work of Heilmann, whose paintings are the record of a search for an appropriate response, rather than the manifestation of a priori premises. This is the primary difference between Heilmann and Westfall, whose work was hung next to hers in the "Conceptual Abstraction" show. While Westfall begins with the grid, Heilmann ends up there. The evidence of earlier images both in the margins of her paintings and under their thin surfaces, as well as her gestural energy, attest to an ad hoc process. Furthermore, Heilmann's imagery is not self-contained but rather allusive, referring to flags, helixes, flagstones, and other structures found in everyday experience. Her paintings force a critique of early Modernist painters such as Mondrian and Malevich because they so adroitly borrow the geometric language of these artists without assuming their theoretical premises. Heilmann's paintings speak of both a formal rigor and a spontaneous wit, which engage the viewer at different levels simultaneously. The tension between structure and brushwork, conception and process, sobriety and humor, keeps the viewer off balance and gives these paintings their quirky punch.

A different technique for engaging the viewer can be found in Row's geometric paintings, also included in both shows. By shifting the conceptual framework of "grid" from perpendicular lines to the curving arcs of longitude and latitude, and by utilizing monumental scale, Row makes spectators more conscious of the space they inhabit in relation to the painting. Row's lush, multipanel meditations play off of earlier grid paintings, from those of Mondrian to those of Reinhardt and the Minimalists, by fragmenting their self-evident systems and by placing the viewer in the center of these fragments rather than outside of them. The structure of Row's paintings exposes geometry as an arbitrary means of mapping space and a man-made



ROSS BLECKNER, "Two Knights Not Nights," oil on canvas, 108" x 72", 1988.  
Photo by Zindman/Fremont; courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery.

invention rather than a divine, formal essence. The incompleteness of his systems denies the broader perspective necessary for closure, leaving us with only the immediate moment, a part of the whole which is the only accessible meaning. We complete these images; time is

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both stopped and acknowledged as an ongoing reality which we ourselves construct.

Finally, the above painters have helped renew abstraction by reconsidering its relationship to culture. While Meyer Schapiro could claim of Abstract Expressionism in 1960, "Abstract painting today has little to do with logical abstraction or mathematics. It is fully concrete, without simulating a world of objects or concepts beyond the frame,"<sup>5</sup> today nearly the opposite is held to be true. In an artist's statement for the "Conceptual Abstraction" show, Valerie Jaudon notes:

It is no longer necessary to declare our independence from the literal and the literary by setting up representation as abstraction's definitive opposite. Abstract painting has much in common with abstract thinking, and abstract thinking is a function of daily life, part of the way we understand and interact with the world.<sup>6</sup>

Drawing on language, mathematics, physics, and technology, the new emphasis on consciousness in abstraction integrates these modes of abstract thought with a sensual formal vocabulary. It is conceptual, physical, and social. It thus aims to reassert humanity in an increasingly abstract environment by reaffirming our propensity for engagement in all its forms. Being fully conscious in today's abstract world is a political act. For in such a world, one may well hold, as did Susan Sontag when writing on Roland Barthes, "the exercise of consciousness is a life's highest aim, because only through becoming fully conscious may one be free."<sup>7</sup>

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### Notes:

1. Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Vintage books, 1990, and Toronto: Random House of Canada, Ltd., 1990), p. xix.
2. Fritjof Capra and David Steindl-Rast with Thomas Matus, *Belonging to the Universe* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 127.
3. Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), p. xix.
4. Bois, p. xxxiii. In his discussion of "Formalism/Politics," Bois quotes Barthes:

Thanks to linguistics and translinguistics, we will perhaps finally avoid the impasse to which sociology and history always lead us: the improper reduction of history to the history of referents. There is a history of forms, structures, writings, which has its own particular time—or rather, times. It's precisely this plurality which seems threatening to some people.

He quotes as well Sergei Eisenstein's response to the journal *Kino* and its slogan: "Our cinema must head for ideological plenitude!"

Eisenstein's argument . . . is that "form is always ideological," and that *Kino's* slogan, in presupposing that any form could be ideologically empty, deprived of content, is either entirely naive or entirely dishonest—depending on the level at which "form" is taken into consideration.

5. Meyer Schapiro, "On the Humanity of Abstract Painting," *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Century: Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1982), pp. 228-229.
6. Valerie Jaudon, artist's statement, "Conceptual Abstraction," catalogue for the show of the same name at Sidney Janis Gallery, November-December, 1991.
7. Susan Sontag, "On Roland Barthes," *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Dorset Press/McGraw-Hill Ryerson, Ltd., 1982), pp. xxxiii-xxxiv.