## DAVID

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ESSAYBYRAPHAELRUBINSTEIN

JOHNGOOD
532 BROADWAY NEW YORK 10012
TEL 212-941-8066 FAX 212-274-0124

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# RETURN TO ORBIT 

RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

Warning! Anyone who has been following David Row's painting, particularly his work of the last five or six years, should be prepared for the unexpected in confronting his most recent body of work. Immediately wild thoughts may run through the mind. Has Row undergone one of those overnight conversions from abstraction to figuration? Has he suddenly started stabbing holes in his canvases or making giant bronze sculptures? The change in Row's work is nothing so sensationalistic, and yet is just as dramatic as any such extreme strategies and in real terms far more difficult.

OZONE SUITE
1993 18" x 22" Lithograph

SPLIT DECISION 1993 24" x 36"
Oil and wax on canvas

With each succeeding show over the last several years Row has been refining and complicating his work. The 1989 canvases, those intricate expanses of black-on-black and white-on-white led to the multicolor, multi-panel paintings of 1990-1991 in which the wide elliptical bands, curving this way and that, proposed the painting as a kind of artistic particle accelerator. As the paintings developed, their details grew in subtlety. The surfaces for instance became ever more nuanced, adding layers of poetic interference to the solid interlocking forms underneath. The colors also grew in complexity, jarring and harmonizing in unlikely combinations that at times looked back wittily to DeKooning's mid-1940s work.

The most natural thing in the world would have been for Row to continue along a straight line, building logically on his achievement, fine tuning details, further twisting the mind-and-eye bending interplay of the various elements in his paintings. Certainly he received enough critical attention and success to encourage him in this direction.

But along the way something happened; Row began to grow dissatisfied with his own work. Of course dissatisfaction is a vital ingredient of any ambitious work of art, but Row's dilemma was more specific. The truth is, he may have been getting just too good at what he was doing. Painting is the result of an easily disturbed balance between craft and imagination, between the facility of the materials and the mirage of the image in the artist's mind, between hand and eye. One of the greatest dangers for any artist is facility. We can all think of those who have given up challenging themselves (and us) and become content with producing example after example of finely made objects which have the look of art but are really just high priced handicraft. David Row was not as yet in danger of coasting on his experience and ability but somewhere there was a force for radical renewal that could eventually no longer be resisted. Like a satellite at the outer edge of its orbit, Row began to turn back towards the center.

Meanwhile, in another part of town, something else was happening which also would begin to change the way many people looked at contemporary art. This is not the place to go into the sweeping global changes that began in 1989 and still continue today. Suffice to say

that since the collapse of the Iron Curtain, all bets have been off. The economic and ideological landmarks of a whole era were swept away almost overnight, and as history heated up it suddenly seemed impossible for art to compete with nightly news. In the artworld, as confused as any other sector by the resulting chaos, much of the response to these changes was shrill and reactionary as people scrambled to renounce the recent past. The " 80 s " became a convenient scapegoat and making, showing, and supporting a different kind of art became a way of seeming to make amends for past wrongs.

It may seem far-fetched to those who think that the only way for art to respond to social change is to become issue-specific, but in its own way David Row's new work is made in direct response to the end of the Cold War, the election of Bill Clinton, the promise of majority rule in South Africa, the dramatic cultural sift in priorities that has been underway since 1989.

Row is not the only artist, nor the only abstract painter, to respond to our altered environment, but where others might be simply tailoring their suits to fit the fashions of the day, Row's change of art is sincere. He is a painter, not a propagandist. To me, a clear sign of his sincerity is that much in the new work goes back to what Row was doing early in his career, in the mid-1980s.

In his reconnection to an earlier moment in his work, Row has not been motivated by nostalgia for lost innocence, rather he is going back to pick up an idea that was always there waiting for him. The first work
of Row's that I remember seeing was Sound, a 1987 painting made with oil and wax on canvas. That painting is recalled in the recent work because of its two equal-sized canvases abutted side by side, each carrying a vertical ellipse. (In Sound the ellipses were also overlaid with a horizontal geometric structure.) After Sound Row began to break the symmetry, to take the ellipse apart, and create jagged, fragmented structures of increasing complexity, becoming an expert choreographer of the missing parts. The memory of the way the previous work was broken into sections is visible in the grids (a new element) which seem to show how the ellipses had once been separated, like bones that have been broken and set.

Row has been using the ellipse as the central element in his painting for a long time. It is impossible to imagine how many times his eyes must have traveled that flattened circle, following its high-speed loop, spinning out or clocking lap after lap. And then one day something completely unprecedented happened: this familiar form, this mute shape suddenly stood up on one end and announced itself as a thing with a name: a zero, a 0 .

What does it mean now that Row has returned to wholeness? That seems to be the central question of these paintings. No longer fragmentary, no longer out to seduce us with their repertoire of ingenious painterly devices. And yet there is also something that says that this is not mere wholeness. Or it is a wholeness which is also a lack; a generosity which is also austere.

The titles of the new paintings - Double or Nothing, Ground Zero, Nothing for John Cage - often speak of absolutes but the paintings themselves are unexpectedly open to transformation, to a variety of interpretations. When I look at them I begin to think about round numbers, those zeros that mark off decades of our lives and I wonder if Row, in mid-life, has begun to contemplate mortality. They also wait like mirrors, to each other and the viewer. At the largest scale they could be perfect frames for full length portraits.

Surprisingly, there is something of Warhol in these paintings. Not so much in the repetition as in the relationship of image to technique. The appearance of the painting is the result of how it has been made, the irregularities of surface and shape occur and are left as they occur. Row accepts but does not make too much of them because he is focused on something more important, on the totality of the painting. The paintings are, accordingly, non-fetishistic. Instead of fetishizing the process, Row has found a back-to-basics approach that gives formal decisions an ethical weight.

A concise way of describing the change in Row's work is to say that he has discovered (or rediscovered) gravity, that he has found a way to make the center hold.

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## BIOGRAPHY

Born 1949 in Portland, Maine
Lives and works in New York City

## SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

1993 New York City. John Good Gallery. ${ }^{\dagger}$
1992 Hamburg, Germany. Ascan Crone Gallery.
1991 New York City. John Good Gallery. ${ }^{\dagger}$
Tokyo. Fujii Gallery. ${ }^{\dagger}$
Paris. Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery. ${ }^{\dagger}$
Chicago, Illinois. Richard Feigen Gallery. ${ }^{\dagger}$
1990 Salzburg, Austria. Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery.
1989 New York City. John Good Gallery. ${ }^{\dagger}$
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Cava Gallery.
1988 Hamburg, Germany. Ascan Crone Gallery. ${ }^{\dagger}$
1987 New York City. John Good Gallery. ${ }^{\dagger}$
1984 New York City. 55 Mercer Street Gallery.
1982 Purchase, New York. State University of New York. New York City. Art Galaxy.
1977 Newark, New Jersey. Rutgers University.
1974 New Haven, Connecticut. Yale University School of Art.
SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Locks Gallery. New American Abstraction: The Conscious Gesture.

New York City. Betsy Senior Contemporary Prints. New Abstraction.

Washington D.C. Baumgartner Galleries, Inc. Modernites. Curated by Joseph Masheck and Manfred Baumgartner.

Rockport, Maine. Maine Coast Artists. Tom Lieber, David Row.

Prato, Italy. Sergio Tossi. Sailing to Byzantium, with Disenchantment. Curated by Elio Cappuccio.

Paris. Rue Rochechouart. Jours Tranquilles á Clichy. Curated by Alain Kirili. (\& New York, Tennisport Arts.)

New Haven, Connecticut. Yale University Museum of Art. Yale Collects Yale: 1950-1993. ${ }^{\dagger}$

San Marino, Italy. State Museum of San Marino. Italia/America l'Astrazione Redefinita. Curated by Demetrio Paparoni. ${ }^{\dagger}$
New York City. American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Invitational Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture.
Tokyo. Mars Gallery. Summer Becomes Eclectic.
Charleston, Virginia. Sunrise Art Museum. New York Selections: Contemporary Works on Paper.

New York City. Betsy Senior Contemporary Prints.
Paris. Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery. 1991.
Verona, Italy. Studio La Cittá 2.

## Abstraction. ${ }^{\dagger}$

Turin, Italy. Galeria in Arco.
New York City. John Good Gallery. La Metafisica della Luce. Curated by Demetrio Paparoni.
New York City. Vrej Baghoomian Gallery. Figuring Abstraction.

New York City. Tony Shafrazi Gallery. Invitational.
New York City. Wolff Gallery. Chicago, Illinois.
Feigen Gallery. Strategies for the Next Painting. ${ }^{\dagger}$
New York City. John Good Gallery. Synthesis.
New York City. Galerie Lelong. Painting.
New York City. John Good Gallery. Works on Paper.
Barcelona, Spain. Fernando Alcolea. Rope. Curated by Christian Leigh.
1990 Atlanta, Georgia. High Museum of Art.
Working on Paper.
Los Angeles. Marc Richards Gallery. Geometric Abstraction.

Washington D.C. Baumgartner Galleries, Inc. 10 Abstract Painters.
New York City. John Good Gallery. Untitled.
Los Angeles. Karl Bornstein Gallery. Provocative Abstraction: New Painting, New York.
1989 New York City. John Good Gallery.
Contemporary Works on Paper.
Helsinki, Finland. Persons Lindell Gallery. Geometric Abstraction.

New York City. John Good Gallery. Post-Modern Painters.

Los Angeles. Marc Richards Gallery. Simple in Appearances.
Cologne, Germany. Galerie Rahmel. Painting Between the Sacred and the Profane.

Louisville, Kentucky. The J.B. Speed Art Museum. Neo Geo/New Abstraction.

New York City. Gallery Urban. Methods of Abstraction.
San Francisco, California. Haines Gallery. Fundamental Abstraction.

Barcelona, Spain. Institute of North American Studies. Sightings. ${ }^{\dagger}$
New York City. Shea \& Beker Gallery. Works on Paper.
New York City. John Good Gallery. Real Abstract.
New York City. Jacob Javits Center. International Gallery Invitational. Four Corners of Abstraction. Curated by Bill Arning.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Cava Gallery. Drawings.
New York City. John Good Gallery. David Row: Paintings / Tom Bills: Sculpture.

1987 New York City. M-13 Gallery.
Los Angeles. Saxon Lee Gallery. Solid Abstraction.
New York City. John Good Gallery. Stimulation.
New York City. One Penn Plaza. Romantic Science. Curated by Carola Van den Houten.

1986 New York City. John Good Gallery. William Baziotes, George Negroponte, David Row.

New York City. Condeso Lawler Gallery. Invitational.

New Haven, Connecticut. Yale University School of Art. Twelve from New York.

New York City. The Pyramid Club. Not Flat.
1985 Stamford, Connecticut. General Electric Corporate Headquarters. General Electric Winter Drawing Show.
1982 New York City. Painting Space 122. Regular Artists.
New York City. The Drawing Center. New Drawing in America.

1981 New York City. The Chelsea Saloon. The Chelsea Saloon Show.

1978 New York City. The Drawing Center. Line-up.
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1991 LEIGH, Christian. David Row. Paris, New York, Chicago: Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, John Good Gallery, Feigen Gallery.
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JANIS, Sidney. Conceptual Abstraction. New York City: Sidney Janis Gallery.
OSTROW, Saul. Strategies for the Next Painting. New York City: Wolff Gallery, Feigen Incorporated.
1989 AUCHINCLOSS, Pamela. Geometry and Abstraction: An Evolution of Suprematist Thought. Helsinki, Finland: Persons \& Lindell Gallery.
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1987 ZIMMER, William. David Row. New York City: John Good Gallery.
1982 BECK, Martha. New Drawing In America. New York City: The Drawing Center.

## SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

The Brooklyn Museum. Brooklyn, New York. Carnegie Museum of Art. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Cleveland, Ohio. University of New Mexico Art Museum. Albuquerque, New Mexico.

## EDUCATION

1974 MFA. Yale University. New Haven, Connecticut.
1972 BA cum laude. Yale University. New Haven, Connecticut.

## AWARDS

1987 National Endowment for the Arts.


