

# Geometry and its *Discontents*

by JOHN ZINSSER



Mary Weatherford, *Nagasaki (Madama Butterfly)*, 1989, oil on canvas, 82x82 in. Galerie Marc Jancou, Zurich.

*The pluralism represented by this new generation of artists is certainly refreshing, escaping any moniker as convenient as the "neo-Geo" tag that critics bestowed upon their 1980s predecessors. As we slip from the last decade to this one, what is emerging is a growing sense of primacy, as expressed through an increased attention paid to material concerns as well as to the emotional drive behind the work.*

Since the origins of nonobjective Cubism, Futurism and Constructivism in Europe, abstract painters have employed geometric structuring in their work as a means of locating its relationship to the surrounding culture. With post-War American abstraction this sensibility became especially acute. One cannot view a Kenneth Noland flatly stained chev-

ron painting of the early 1960s, for example, without seeing in it the expansionist optimism that charged the air during John Kennedy's presidency. How, then, are we to respond to the varied ways in which contemporary American artists are now addressing painting issues through the predetermined language of geometric abstraction? The text that follows

looks at eight representatives of this movement. All approach their work not in terms of appropriation or nostalgia, but with a spirit that responds to the current cultural climate.

Gary Lang's freehand grids and targets are surprisingly painterly, loaded with color and exuberant energy. In the square format, Lang's work initially resembles overdetermined

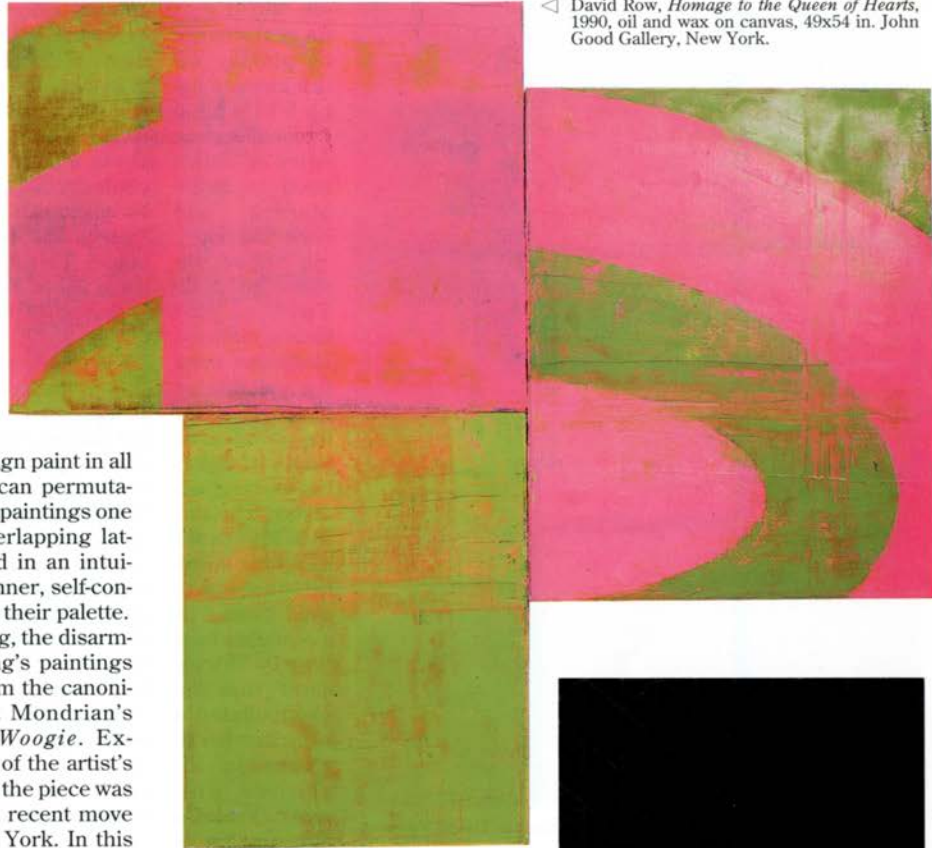
madrás plaid. In tondo, it looks more like a tortuous test for colorblindness. But neither of these descriptions does justice to the personal and emotive qualities that Lang's paintings contain, or to the ominously disturbing presence these works assert as their self-canceling color schemes are viewed over time.

Using commercial sign paint in all its straight-from-the-can permutations, Lang builds his paintings one stripe at a time. Overlapping lattices are constructed in an intuitively methodical manner, self-consciously "cheerful" in their palette.

In immediate reading, the disarming simplicity of Lang's paintings seems to take off from the canonical example of Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. Executed near the end of the artist's life in the early 1940s, the piece was informed by his then recent move from Europe to New York. In this work Mondrian celebrated New York as a Jazz-age matrix of color, shape and sound. Likewise, Lang's overactive paintings herald the animated liveliness of the modern cityscape, serving as metaphorical signage for the shared metropolitan experience.

Representing a more coolly calculated approach are Michael Scott's neo-Op Art stripe paintings. Executed mechanically, Scott's works consist of hard-edged vertical pinstripe black bands applied onto primed mat white honeycomb aluminum grounds. The way in which the paintings are physically made is in no way manifestly apparent. As such, the gestural presence of the maker is coldly distanced from the viewer.

Further alienation is induced by the actual viewing experience: the paintings are so manically hyperoptic that they are literally difficult to look at. Faced with one such painting, this viewer found himself seeing a pulsat-



◁ David Row, *Homage to the Queen of Hearts*, 1990, oil and wax on canvas, 49x54 in. John Good Gallery, New York.

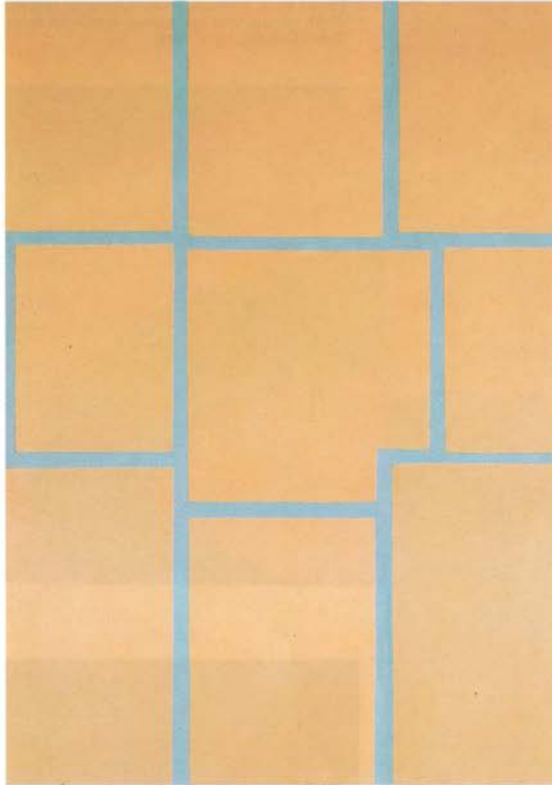
ing moiré pattern at the center of his field of vision and rushes of prismatic color at its peripheries. While Scott's work may be plotted in a rigorously formal manner, in its viewing it becomes wildly active, even psychoactive.

A pat response to this work would be that — like the mid-1980s work of Ross Bleckner and Philip Taaffe — Scott is appropriating a motif from Op Art as a way of ironically resuscitating a "dead" art historical movement. It's true, no doubt, that the configurations and execution of Scott's paintings borrows heavily from the tropes of the original Op movement, those of pattern painters of the 1960s such as Bridget Riley and Victor Vasarely. Yet that's a little too easy. Scott's work has a valid primacy of its own, troublingly effective in its severe emotional detachment.

Mary Heilmann, the oldest of the artists being discussed here, brings an unexpected youthful playfulness



Richmond Burton, *One*, 1990, oil on linen, 104x48 in. Matthew Marks Inc., New York.



Stephen Westfall, *Mirage*, 1988, oil on canvas, 60x42 in. Daniel Newburg Gallery, New York.

to her work. Over the last few years she has concerned herself with the manner in which geometry can be rendered gesturally, humanistically. Heilmann builds up her canvases in thin washes of primary colors, always keeping her iconographic terms to the absolute minimum. In fact, her final compositions are often arrived at through a negation of what's under-

at the works individually or collectively. And the paintings, although consistent with one another in conception and execution, displayed a daringly eclectic set of pictorial ideas. Many employed tricky formats, shaped canvases which served not only to determine the geometric schema within but made explicit the role of the stretcher bars and canvas

ple, but it gets its real charge by playing off the already established minimalist strategies of artists such as Brice Marden and Niele Toroni.

In her recent show at New York's Pat Hearn Gallery, Heilmann used the installation to openly attack the prevalent attitude of painting-as-rarefied-object. The gallery, known for its sparse installations, was used instead as a container for a freely hung show that accommodated a large number of works in all shapes and sizes. Viewers did not know whether to look

cultural notions of beauty and gender in relation to the painting-making activity. Weatherford makes medium-to large-scale square-format works in which a photosilkscreened image is incised with a centered target motif. Often a stereotypically "feminine" photographic image is superimposed by silkscreen on top of a decisively "masculine" hard-edged geometric target. This double entendre gives the work an edgy quality that belies its initial readings of beauty and elegance.

In a recent series shown at the Marc Jancou Gallerie in Zurich, Weatherford adopted the opera *Swan Lake* as her subject. She had a photographer take a picture of swan feathers seemingly floating through space. This image was enlarged into a silkscreen the size of the canvas and used as a common leitmotif between the paintings. In each, a differing degree of hard-edged geometry would show through the image. Weatherford chose colors in the silver and black range to further the graphic reading of the work and to play off the photographic nature of the painting's source. In all, the imagery remains tautly flat, like a once-removed Greenbergian allover field.

The choice of the target motif is certainly an art historically loaded one, invoking comparisons to Jasper Johns and Kenneth Noland. While Weatherford's serial usage of silkscreened photograph as a painterly device recalls Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg. Yet, in distinction from the highly-visible group of 1980s painters that preceded her (Sherrie Levine, Mike Bidlo, Julie Wachtel, et al.), Weatherford cites



Michael Scott, *Untitled #23*, 1990, enamel on aluminum, 15 1/2x192 in. Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York.

neath. Her imagery — evoking readings of: squares floating on fields; irregular flagstones; climbing helixes; or flags of yet-undiscovered nations — is often defined by a single milky sheet of paint. This methodology may at first appear disarmingly sim-

as a physical support structure. Throughout, Heilmann displayed gestural freedom without ever losing a tightness of purpose.

In her work Mary Weatherford, more than Heilmann, is openly concerned with questioning pre-existing

her historical sources gently, in a manner that is not openly appropriative. Weatherford's reading of art history-as-text is an intentionally skewed misreading, calling into doubt the power-structures that those images so readily recall.



Mary Heilmann, *Red Cracky*, 1991, oil on canvas, 60x42 in. Pat Hearn Gallery, New York.



David Dupuis, *Untitled*, 1991, paper and flashe on canvas, 72x60 in. Clarissa Dalrymple, New York.

Richmond Burton is more concerned with the literalization of metaphor. His "thought plane" series is an overt investigation into the mechanics of painting-making. These works treat their own physical working methodology as directly analogous to the painter's thought process. The wooden support structures for these single- and multipanel pieces serve as a rigid architecture, from which the final configuration is determined. Striped bands of black paint are described by swings of a compass from focal points located either at the image's center, or at its perimeters. The wooden blocks from which the compass turns are made are left attached, the final works presenting themselves as self-determining machines. The resulting stripes are the width of a single wide brush separated by thin areas of raw canvas — a structure that draws immediate comparison to Frank Stella's black paintings of the late 1950s.

But where Stella employed this device as a kind of dead-end self-describing tautology, in Burton's case

the format relates more directly to the body-specific aspect of the painting activity, the compass arcs serving as mimetic surrogates for the proportional reach of a painter's arm: they are mappings of the physical process through which all abstract paintings are made.

As with Burton's imagery, David Dupuis' mazelike constructions foremost describe the process of their own making. Using gel painting medium, Dupuis attaches thin strips of paper directly to the canvas' surface, achieving a tactile bas-relief effect. The resulting configurations — like a vulnerably human form of die casting — range in mood from freely antic to oppressively claustrophobic. The paper and canvas surface is then further activated by Dupuis' use of flashe paint, a mat waterbase paint that is brushed on or fingerpainted in successive translucent layers. A distinctive pure white surface light results, variable and seemingly undulating.

Like Jasper Johns' use of encaustic, for Dupuis this methodology allows a way of achieving painterly results

while preserving the material integrity of the work's own making. Like Philip Taaffe's mid-1980s collage usage of Op-inspired geometry, Dupuis employs paper as a hard-edged template against which he counterpoises a more painterly touch: rationality pitted against the ineffable forces of human emotion.

Stephen Westfall's flat grid constructions and neo-Suprematist diamond configurations also reveal a quiet pathos, their imagery resting with discomfiture upon the achievements of Modernism. Painted in toned-down variants of primary colors, his characteristic grid paintings never quite line up straight, as if they have slipped from a perfect Platonic condition to one that accepts the doubts and failures of the modernist program. Like the writing of Samuel Beckett, they capture a sense of hopelessness through an austerity of terms. These paintings are not cynical or ironical; they are lovingly painted in thin layers, the hard-edged geometry not achieved with masking tape but by a hand that shows meticu-

lous and halting self-restraint.

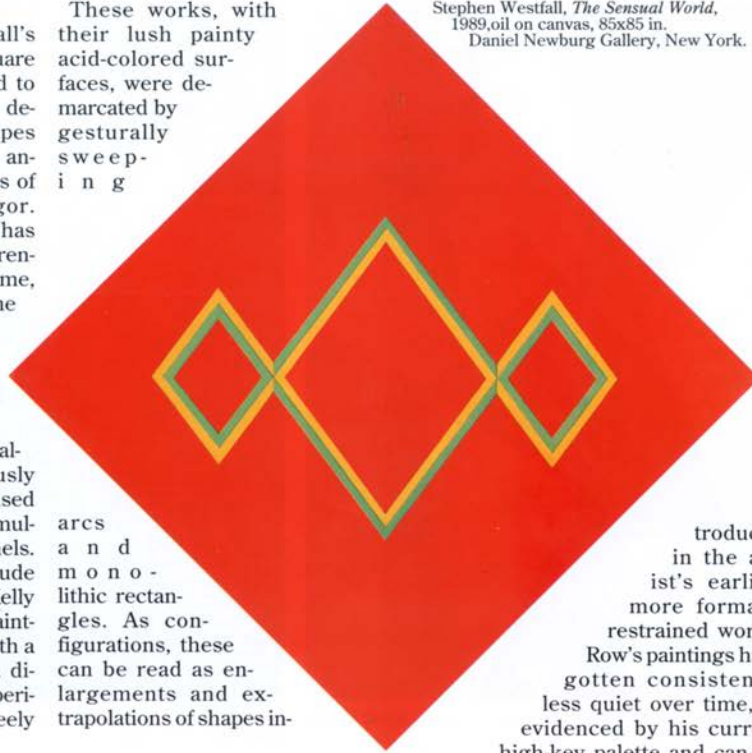
More free-spirited are Westfall's diamond series, in which the square canvas is literally turned on end to become a diamond. This format determined, the free-floating shapes contained seem to spin off one another, let loose from the confines of conventional rectilinear rigor. Throughout his work, Westfall has determined a hermetic self-referential language that, viewed over time, asserts a self-negating logic prone to visual pun. As with Westfall, David Row's work plays off a viewer's pre-established expectations of what a geometric painting should "look like."

His recent show at John Good Gallery in New York was ambitiously conceived and executed, comprised of large-scale works made up of multiple intersecting rectangular panels. Here Row's work shared an attitude with his antecedents Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella: that abstract paintings can operate at a scale and with a visual impact that relates them directly to the popular culture experience. As such, they transgress freely from rarefied tradition.

These works, with their lush painty acid-colored surfaces, were demarcated by gesturally sweeping

arcs and monolithic rectangles. As configurations, these can be read as enlargements and extrapolations of shapes in-

Stephen Westfall, *The Sensual World*, 1989, oil on canvas, 85x85 in. Daniel Newburg Gallery, New York.



troduced in the artist's earlier, more formally restrained works. Row's paintings have gotten consistently less quiet over time, as evidenced by his current high-key palette and can-do-no-wrong confident paint handling. For Row, sheer conviction has subsumed the role of content, the paintings asserting themselves most strongly through their heightened physicality.

The pluralism represented by this new generation of artists is certainly refreshing, escaping any moniker as convenient as the "neo-Geo" tag that critics bestowed upon their 1980s predecessors. This new crop is clearly more free-associational in its use of art historical quotation, openly borrowing without getting hung up on the notion of the past record as a sacred text.

As we slip from the last decade to this one, what is emerging is a growing sense of primacy, as expressed through an increased attention paid to material concerns as well as to the emotional drive behind the work. As the decade progresses, perhaps a sense of shared ideology will more clearly coalesce. It's an exciting possibility.



Gary Lang, *Perforated and Awareness*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 48x48 in. Michael Klein Inc., New York.

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