

SPECIAL ISSUE

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## ART MAGAZINE



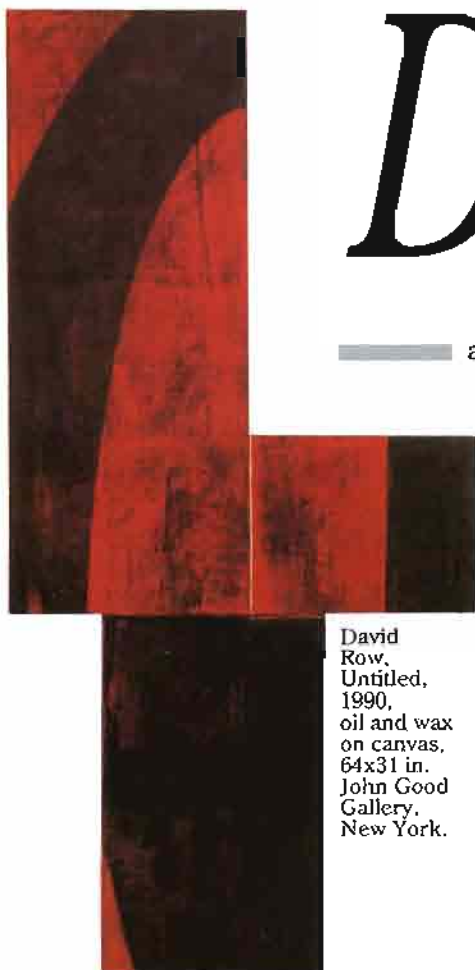
DAVID ROW, UNTITLED, 1991. OIL AND WAX ON CANVAS, 116x136 IN.

### **The New Forms of Abstraction (Second Part):**

Texts by Donald Kuspit, Stephen Ellis, Allan Moore, Robert C. Morgan, Lucio Pozzi, Marjorie Welish, Gertrud Sandqvist, David Reed, Haim Steinbach, Rene Ricard, Olivier Revault d'Allonnes, Pat Steir, Giulio Paolini, Tomaso Kemeny, Peter Halley, Archie Rand, Valerie Jaudon, Pietro Bellasi, Bernar Venet, David Row, Demetrio Paparoni, Catherine Lee, Gary Lang, Stephen Westfall, Gianni Dessi, Elio Cappuccio, Hubert Scheibl, Ulli Moser.

# David Row

a conversation with DEMETRIO PAPARONI



David Row, Untitled, 1990, oil and wax on canvas, 64x31 in. John Good Gallery, New York.

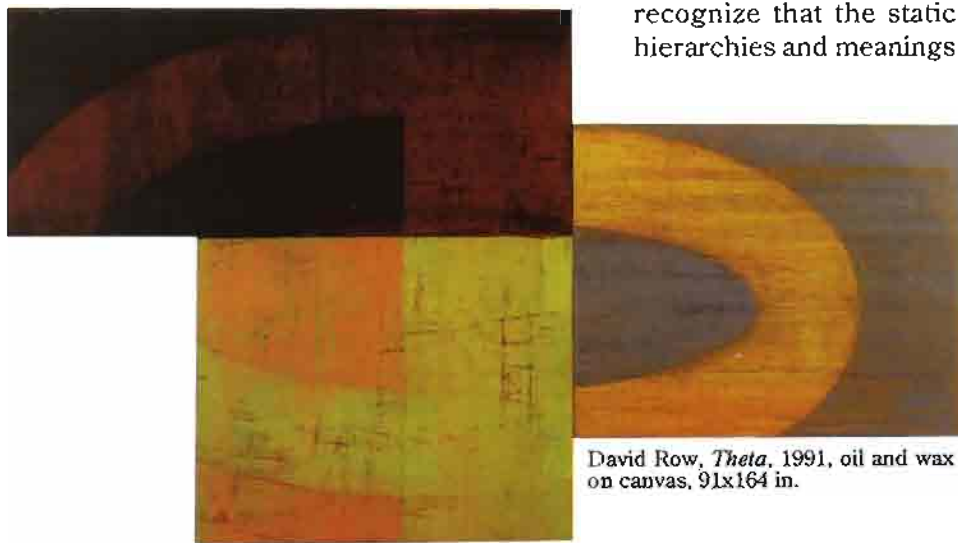
*We have to recognize that the static hierarchies and meanings inherent in the language of classic abstraction are closed and no longer viable. This language has to be broken down and opened up again; its imagery has to reflect the fractured, provisional, and linguistic nature of contemporary life and thought.*

DEMETRIO PAPARONI: *In the 1950s abstraction was characterized by a markedly subjective and emotional quality, which often included metaphorical implications (think of De Kooning's women or of Pollock's use of the patterns traced with colored sand in the rites of the American Indians). In your opinion does abstraction today still accept this metaphorical dimension, or has it become essentially self-referential? In the sense, for example, that a square is a square and nothing but a square, as was the case in minimal art? The ellipse that you use in your own works is broken, in fact, from the viewpoint both of form and color. In recent years Mario Merz has constructed spirals on the basis of the Fibonacci sequence, where each entry is the sum of the two previous ones: hence 1, 1, 2 (1+1), 3 (1+2), 5 (2+3), 8 (3+5) and so forth, a sequence that also recalls the laws of biology. Smithsonian's spiral, too, aimed at a concrete basis in reality. In the light of these experiences, do you think that*

*contemporary art can establish a metaphorical relation with the laws of nature?*

DAVID ROW: The truth is that we no longer perceive abstract form self-referentially. I've always had a problem with that anyway, so I'm satisfied with a less closed reading of abstract form. In my own work, I'm interested in abstraction because it allows imagery to exist independently, as objects and events do in the world, rather than being tied to depiction. And as a language, geometric form is communicable and has, potentially, a large and complex vocabulary. Now, because geometric form is relatively elemental and because the inclination of the human mind is to impose meaning, it provokes a wide range of associations. Managing the drift and inflection of these allusions within a thematic vein is part of the task. Choosing a language, a vocabulary, and a syntactical approach keeps them from being arbitrary, but a protean quality vis-à-vis meaning and allusion is crucial in keeping the im-

agery alive. We have to recognize that the static hierarchies and meanings



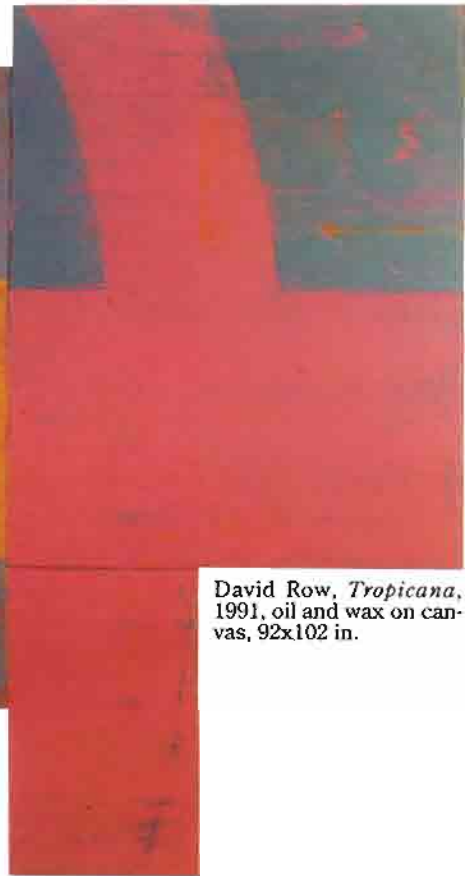
David Row, Theta, 1991, oil and wax on canvas, 91x164 in.

inherent in the language of classic abstraction are closed and no longer viable. This language has to be broken down and opened up again; its imagery has to reflect the fractured, provisional, and linguistic nature of contemporary life and thought.

As you know, one of the main issues confronting contemporary abstract painting is the role that meaning plays, whether it takes the form of allusion, metaphor, allegory, or any other mediated communication. If these forms, particularly allegory, but metaphor as well, take on a one-dimensional meaning, then they are just as limited and inadequate as traditional representation. They don't have to be. By definition, a concept is a general idea, one not limited in scope or application. I am convinced that abstraction is the language of this time, and language and content are inextricably tied together. This language is innately mutable. It has the ability to communicate on many levels simultaneously and to generate a myriad of subjective responses, much the way a street crime would provoke different interpretations from various witnesses. Painting is a social act where the viewer is not just a receiver but also an interpreter. If metaphors are to be drawn, it is here, in the space between the painting and the viewer.

The relationship you draw between the Fibonacci sequence and abstract geometric form is interesting. If this level of information can produce profound imagery, all the better. But the imagery is still the issue. Its source can be literally anything, but its transformation into the context of painting is either significant or it is not. And we only know that when we see it, image by image. The introduction of concrete information into contemporary abstract painting is one important change. Others include the abandonment of a Kantian ideal, the introduction of a fractured quality both within the pictorial language and related to the image itself, a sense of the provisional, and the legitimacy of subjective interpretation.

D.P.: *Do you consider "new abstraction" a proper definition for much of*



David Row, *Tropicana*, 1991, oil and wax on canvas, 92x102 in.

*that contemporary painting which brings about, in the absence of recognizable images, a deconstruction of the pictorial (abstract) language of previous decades?*

D.R.: A redefinition of abstraction is underway and it's definitely "new" in that many aspects of the endeavor called "abstract painting" have changed. Although a disparate project, abstraction is still the significant quality which so perfectly alludes to our culture now. And will, even more so, in the future. We are becoming a more visual society and one dominated by conceptual generalizations and abstractions. There has been a significant rupture in the intentions behind abstract paintings and in the way these paintings are made and seen. Among a number of issues upon which many contemporary abstract painters agree, deconstruction of both images and attitudes is a primary precondition to the development of new modes of abstraction.

D.P.: *If one were to affirm that painting follows a destiny of its own, this would automatically preclude the possibility of conceptualization and would be tantamount to saying that the abstract art of today is instinctive. I myself, on the contrary, see contemporary abstract art as closely bound up with the real,*

*nearly as if it were a new form of realism. And in light of the theories put forth by Peter Halley, it has become abundantly clear how a geometric art can contain social and political implications even more prominent than those found in a painting that is realistic in the traditional sense. Can you say something about your own attitude toward conceptualization?*

D.R.: Concepts (i.e. ideas) have always been an important part of my involvement with painting. Particularly now, it is important to investigate the conceptual possibilities for painting. Painting, now more than ever, remains an act of conceptualization. The important question is, "which concepts are more relevant and profound?"

D.P.: *Do you think that a purely instinctive work of art is possible today?*

D.R.: I do not believe in a specific destiny for painting, that being precisely the kind of Platonic/Kantian idea that I reject. Instinct is a tool, not a position. I do not know if there is a purely instinctive painting today, although I doubt that it is even possible. □

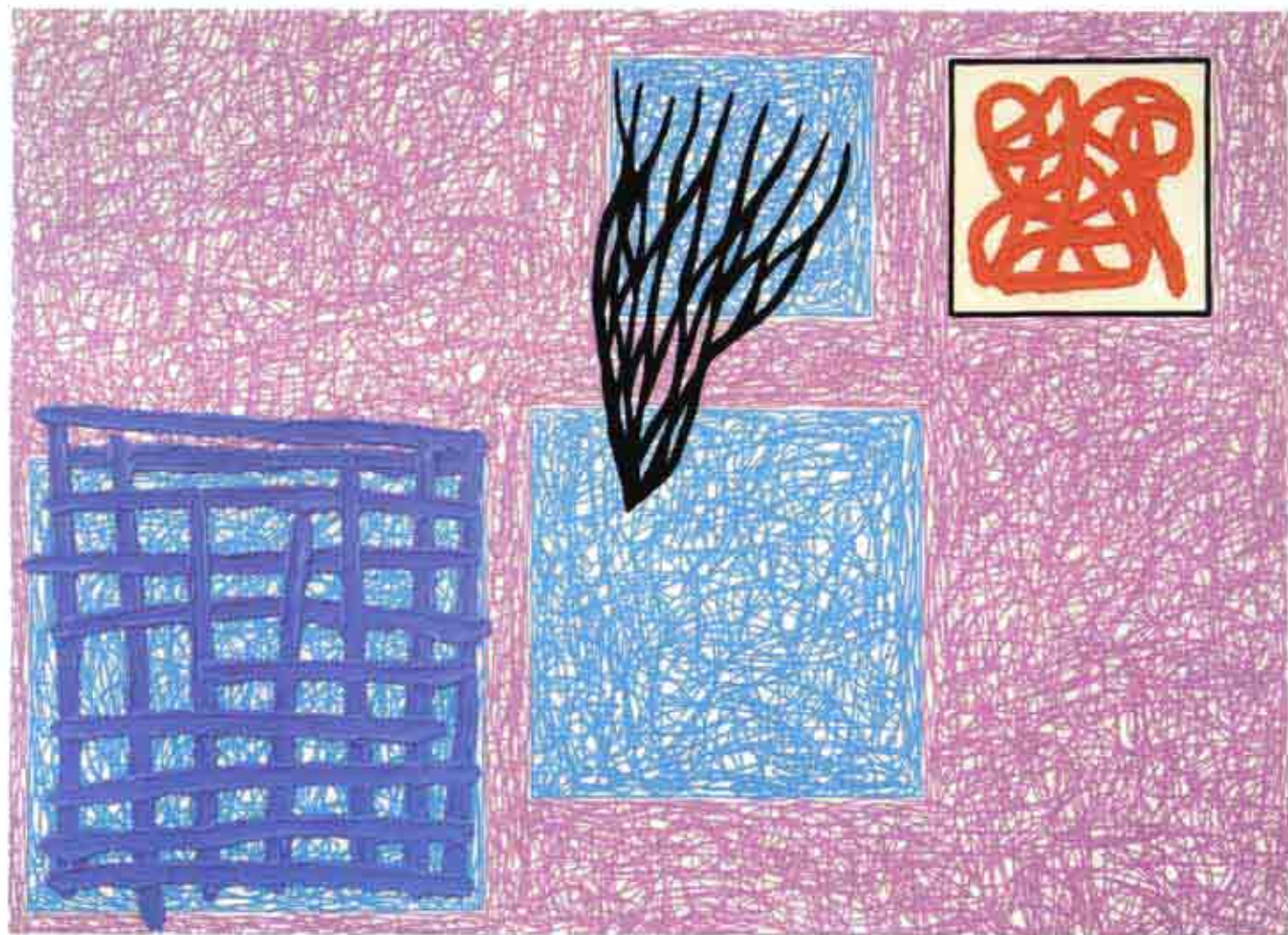


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JONATHAN LASKER, LOVE'S RHETORIC, 1990. OIL ON LINEN, 60x80 IN

**The New Forms of Abstraction (First Part):** Texts by Ford Beckman, Mel Bochner, David Carrier, Patricia Collins & Richard Milazzo, Arthur C. Danto, Jim Dine, Lydia Dona, Moira Dyer, Michel Haar, Peter Halley, James Hillman, Alain Kirili, Per Kirkeby, Donald Kuspit, Jonathan Lasker, Fabian Marcaccio, Joseph Masheck, Mark Milloff, Olivier Mosset, Saul Ostrow, Demetrio Papanoni, Robert Rosenblum, Sean Scully, Jeanne Siegel, Cary Smith, Leo Steinberg, Gary Stephan, Terry Winters, John Zinsser.



# Geometry and its *Discontents*

by JOHN ZINSSER



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

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

*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.*

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

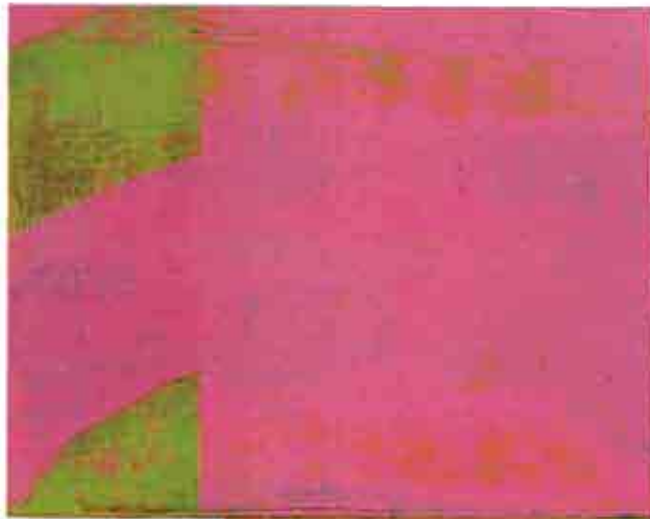
madras plaid. In tondo, it looks more like a tortuous test for color-blindness. But neither of these descriptions does justice to the personal and emotive qualities that Lang's paintings contain, or to the ominously disturbing presence these works assert as their self-canceling color schemes are viewed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

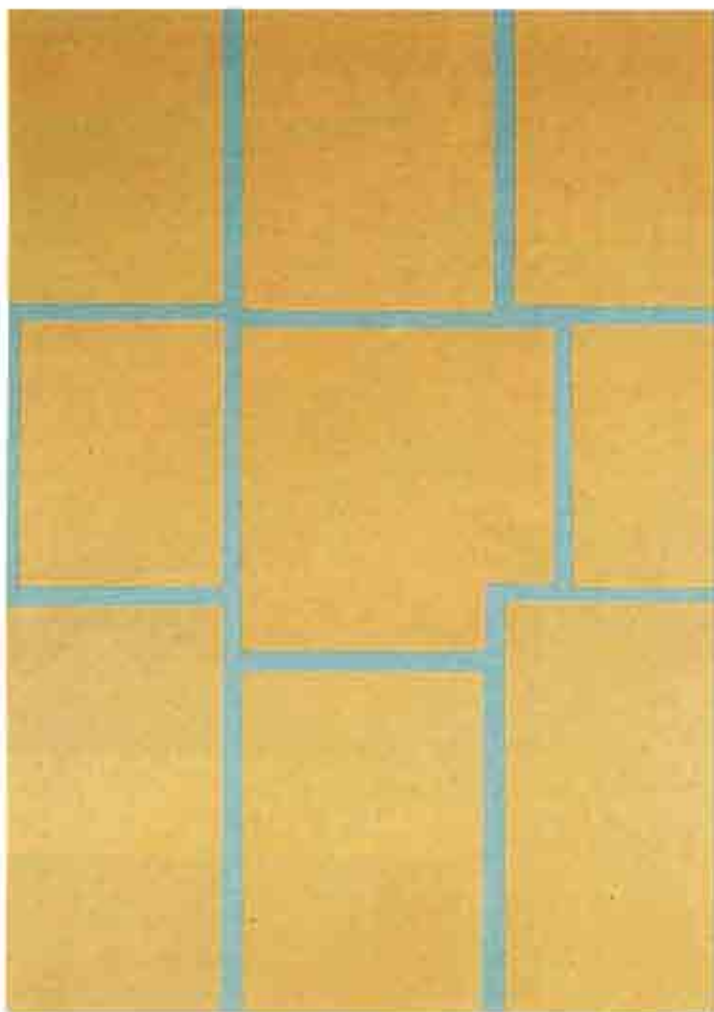
A pat response to this work would be that — like the mid-1980s work of Ross Bleckner and Philip Taaffe — Scott is appropriating a motif from Op Art as a way of ironically resuscitating a "dead" art historical movement. It's true, no doubt, that the configurations and execution of Scott's paintings borrows 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-

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

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

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 1/2 x 19 1/2 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 sin-

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 Hellmann, *Red Cracksy*, 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 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-



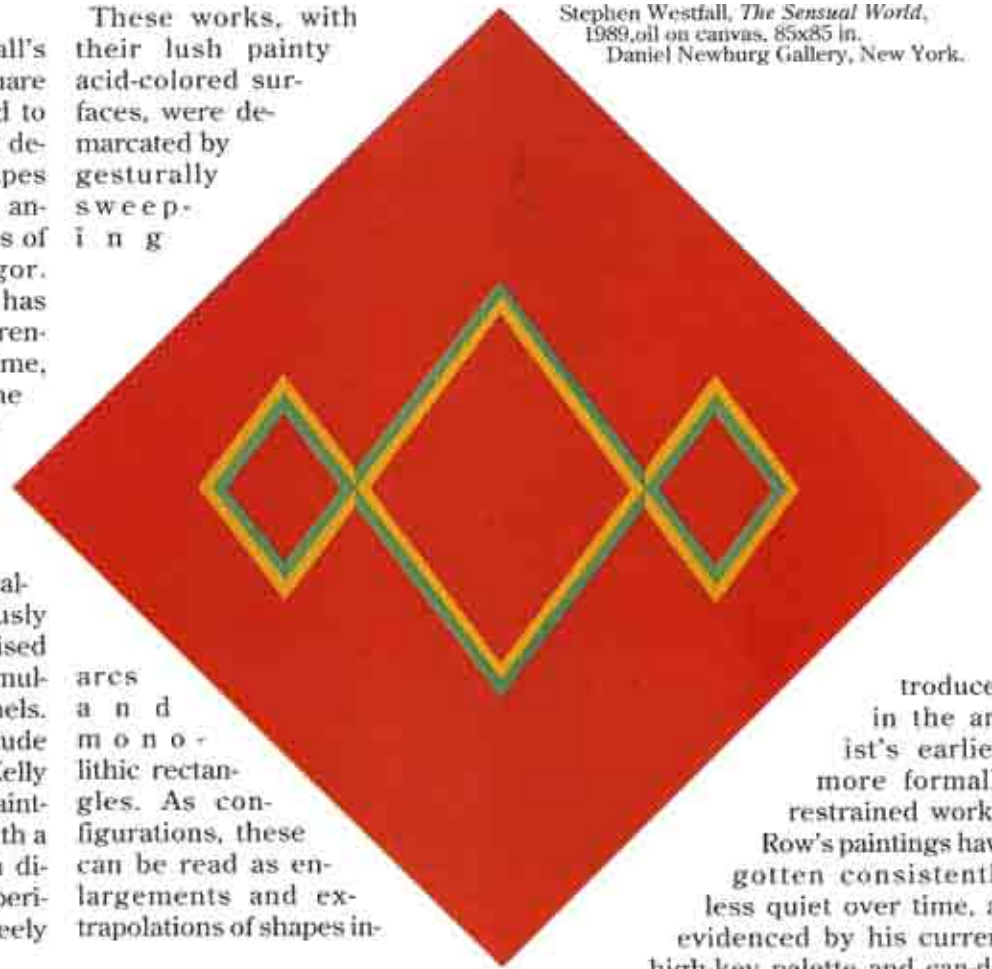
lous and halting self-restraint.

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.

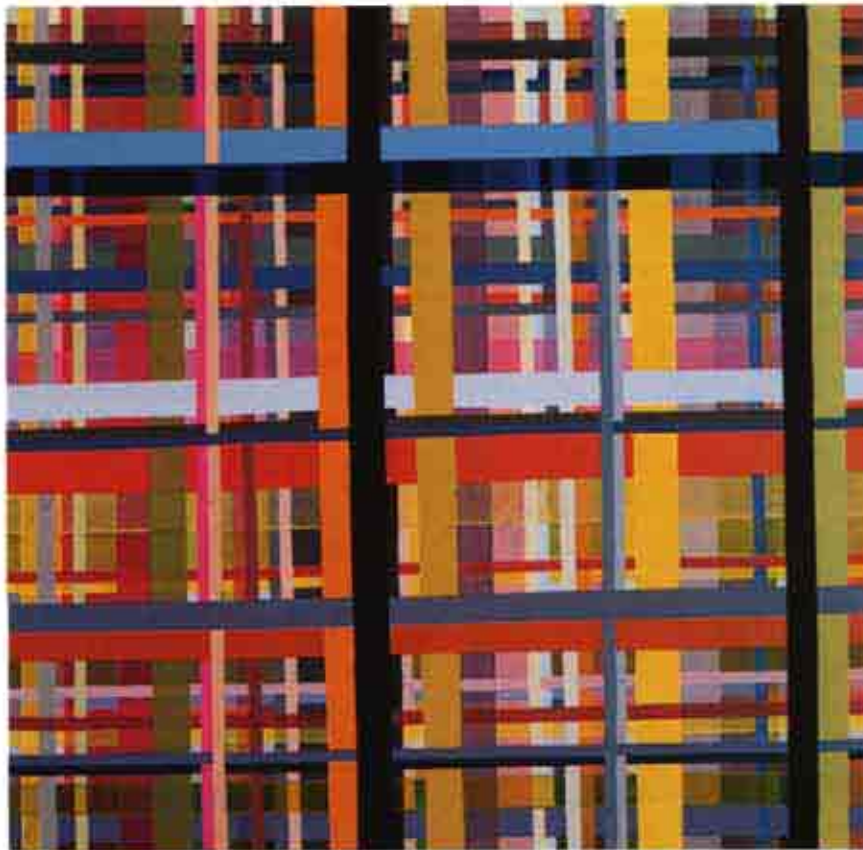


troduced in the artist's earlier, more formally restrained works. Row's paintings have gotten consistently less quiet over time, as evidenced by his current high-key palette and can-do-no-wrong confident paint handling. For Row, sheer conviction has subsumed the role of content, the paintings asserting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

John Zinsser is a New York-based painter and writer. □



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