

March 22 to April 27, 1986

Carnegie-Mellon University Art Gallery

Exhibition curated by Elaine A. King

with an essay by David Carrier

# ABSTRACTION

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A B S T R A C T I O N

Sam Gilliam

Emily Cheng

Sharon Gold

Jonathan Lasker

Kathleen Montgomery

Michael Mulhern

David Reed

Stephen Westfall

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# Acknowledgements

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The artists in this show have been a model of cooperation and inspiration. I am grateful to them for agreeing to participate. Their work made ABSTRACTION/ABSTRACTION possible.

Elaine A. King, Director  
Carnegie-Mellon University Art Gallery  
and Hewlett Gallery

## Non-Objective Art in the Eighties

Abstract art is a specialized art, conveying its significance through a visual language devoid of narrative translation. It has been Modernism's special child, the celebrated avant-garde, which for decades has generated innovative stylistic movements. In recent years, serious abstraction was overlooked while figurative art occupied the fashionable center stage of the art world.

However, in the past few years, a new interest in abstract art appears to be growing. Many have asked why? Are we focusing on abstraction because we find Neo-Expressionism's figurative allegories tedious? Or is abstraction making a comeback because it is a process of internalization, summation and essence? Or is its contemplative character inspiring a new sense of intrigue?

This exhibition, *ABSTRACTION/ABSTRACTION*, is a testimony to the vitality of non-objective art in the eighties. It presents a diverse collection of non-specific visual potential, revealing a sampling of the provocative directions artists are currently exploring. For the purpose of amplifying each artist's work, fewer artists were selected. The abstract modes depicted here are not meant to be thought of as an inclusive representation. What seems to characterize this, and other art I looked at during the selection process, is its flair for physical invention and the artists' unique frames of reference. Gone is pure, formal abstraction. These artists are no longer bound by fixed stylistic rules. They know the tradition of twentieth century abstraction so well that they are able to employ variants of its vocabulary in an intuitive and free manner — the issue is no longer that of being strictly abstract or figurative. There is no right or wrong method for making abstract art. As a result, boundaries become blurred, allowing abstraction and figuration to meld within appropriate references and painterly expressiveness. A sense of restructuring and redefining abstraction is a common occurrence in this art.

The artists chosen for this show represent several generations. Sam Gilliam is the veteran spokesperson who has been exploring the abstract tradition since the mid-sixties and who has inherited most directly the ideals and vocabulary of Modernism. I have selected pieces which are representative of his creative output from 1969 through 1985. This work comprises the cornerstone of the exhibit, stating and examining multiple issues which address many currents of abstraction and Gilliam's continuous reappraisal of form and content. It also illustrates his tenacious, imaginative development, demonstrating his continual sabotaging of formalist principles. He has invented his own visual language for the purpose of expressing his ideas and emotions.

*Process and formal concerns have always been important to him; but equally so has been the heroic transcendent strain of American landscape painting . . . when Gilliam speaks of the (landscape,) however, he doesn't mean an outdoor scene viewed from a distance. The landscape he evokes in his paintings is intended to recreate the visceral experience of being inside of nature, which for Gilliam has strong spiritual implications.<sup>1</sup>*

Finally, color is a prime element in Gilliam's art, activating space, and allowing for pictorial extension.

The other artists in the show, Emily Cheng, Sharon Gold, Jonathan Lasker, Michael Mulhern, Kathleen Montgomery, David Reed, and Stephen Westfall vary in age, but collectively their work shows the complex diversity and redefinition of abstract art today. This art surfaces with a new-found strength and frankness, resulting from the artists' aesthetic questionings and their acquired deconstructed historical vocabularies.

Collective composites of curved and modeled forms set in an ambiguous space characterize the supernaturally mysterious, *emblematic* paintings of Emily Cheng. A sense of wonder is evoked by the glowing, colorful, organic forms which never take on a particular reference but provoke questions about their meaning. Cheng's subtle and self-referential work is a tribute to non-objective art's transcendent power.

Sharon Gold's strict geometrical, Minimalist influenced program has given way to a form of

abstraction suggestive of the highly personal vocabulary found in O'Keefe and Dove. A poetic spontaneity echoes through her organic seas of curvilinear color bands. Again, a sense of heightened luminosity permeates this new work which is characterized by a structural strength. A sense of urgency can be felt in these erotic compositions which appear to confront different lively forces.

A graphic quality is evoked by Jonathan Lasker's ironic paintings of strange totemic shapes. Their patterned ground and graffiti motifs allow them to straddle the world of kitsch and high art. At first glance, they appear to be equivalents of child-like puzzles prompting humor. Another look allows their chilling seriousness to permeate the opaque, bright colors and the linear illusionistic layered space. This is a deliberate and difficult art in which its creator reinvents Modernism's language for the purpose of setting up dichotomies and perceptual freshness.

Michael Mulhern's vigorously painted constructions of contrasting, modulating, planes, darting off in multiple horizontal and vertical directions, celebrate the materiality of abstract painting. The dynamic organization of his diagonally oriented shapes arranged in a complex state of tension with one another convey the feeling of movement and resistance. A synthesis of Cubism, Futurism, and Constructivism is evident in these compelling works which achieve a clever balance between shape and surface definition.

The language of Minimalism informs the work of Kathleen Montgomery. Of all the artists in this show, her adherence to this style is significant. In her subliminal, black graphite constructions, a relationship between the work and the surrounding space is created. The content of her work is the form, the material, the space, and the interaction between the object and the viewer's space. A sense of monumentality is achieved in these rather small structures by their dark black mysterious presence.

A theatre of mark-making is presented in the complex, panoramic, vertical and horizontal planes of David Reed. Ambiguous space becomes the dense arena for his inventive surfaces. Here incongruous textures and gestures coalesce in dark fields, reminiscent of film strips from a science fiction drama. Seductive colors, dramatic light and a pageant of varied lines simultaneously perform in multi-layered transparent planes. Reed engages complexity with a sense of purposeful motion and contrast.

Stephen Westfall's elegant geometric shapes evoke an architectonic presence. He provides an alternative mode to this form of geometric abstraction by the modulation of his painterly application. The ever-penetrating luminosity pervading his canvases works to dispel the inspired figure/ground relationship, transforming the anticipated reductivism into a set of contradictory coefficients. The implied strength of the linear forms becomes diffused by the ethereal field which contains them.

Throughout much of the eighties, abstraction was essentially ignored by museums and galleries because of the art world's manic love affair with figuration. But artists committed to this idiom remained challenged by the potential of non-representational art. The eight artists in this exhibition continued to explore the realm of this sublime aesthetic even though their audience was extremely limited. In their pursuits, they attempted to develop an intensely personal language rather than working within a particular style. The complex vocabulary of Modernism informs their art — an art which is rooted in abstraction's rich history. They draw on the ideas of Cubism, Constructivism, Suprematism, Abstract Expressionism, and Minimalism, integrating these traditions with their individual awareness and social interpretations.

Artists continued to re-examine the definitions of abstraction and discovered a variety of challenging, new approaches. They have read carefully the critical discourses concerning Pluralist art and Neo-Expressionism and have managed to integrate a complex reservoir of information into their creative processes. The abstract artists of the eighties have observed numerous exhibitions and have reflected upon the vituperative diatribes launched against non-objective work. The complex knowledge they have acquired heightens their sensitivity and gives them a freedom to approach the abstract tradition from a confident posture, rather than a defensive, reactionary one. They are unlike many Pluralist and figurative artists who felt compelled to prove a point, or to undermine the existing order. While the spotlight was on figuration, these abstract artists worked silently but diligently, and over the years, their work has undergone a metamorphosis. This is particularly evident in the work of some artists like Sam Gilliam, Sharon Gold, Michael Mulhern and David Reed. The changes they manifest reflect their dialogue with artistic and global developments of the past fifteen years. Today's non-objective abstraction includes the intellect and the emotions, employing the language of painting in an optimum manner and fusing the classical and formal with the romantic and expressive. The artists meld color, line, shape, stroke, and figure/ground in order to communicate what Kasimir Malevich referred to as the *non-objective emotions*. Thus, the transcendence of formalism which characterizes much of the work in this show is the result of a succession of complex activities and responses.

Abstract art, with its landmark movements and its attempts to clarify the concerns of art in the twentieth century, became threatened throughout the seventies as the foundations of Modernism began to erode. As Frank Stella and his generation tired of the labored art of Abstract Expressionism, with its ambiguous textures, the post-modern artists of the seventies found the geometric idiom of Minimalism inappropriate as they rethought the functions of art in society. The vocabulary of Modernism had become an oppressive academy for younger artists, who found Modernist values devoid of spiritual essence and idealism. At the onset of the seventies, a need for withdrawal from the existing art structure and a redefinition of art became necessary. The experimentation of artists throughout the decade was necessary in order to liberate art from the rigid formalism and autocratic dogma imposed on art by Clement Greenberg and the curators and critics who posited his theories about the *formal facts of painting* throughout the sixties.

During this complex and contradictory period, which has become known as the Pluralist Era, new values and dimensions began to inform contemporary art. A relaxation of categories and boundaries characterize the period, with no prevailing style or heroes, and often several genres become assimilated into a single work. Much of seventies art represented an extension of the journey into the self, a manifestation of the consciousness, and a self-examination which flourished in many areas beyond the visual arts. In much of the work, the idea became the expression, with form giving way to content. Without being aware of it, the artists of the seventies who were spinning off in multiple directions, paved the way for Neo-Expressionism with its brutal, aggressive blatancy. The need of seventies artists to go beyond a single criterion allowed the return of creative materialism and permitted art to transcend its rhetorical bondage.

Towards the close of the seventies, artists and the greater art world began to tire of the undefined character of Pluralist art. The year 1978 marks the beginning of what has become known as the return of figurative art and the dawning of Neo-Expressionism. Almost immediately, painting was restored to its position of prominence, with idea and content returning with a vengeance. Much of the new figuration had an expressive purpose; the form of the work of art grew out of the content — the idea — and was indistinguishable from it. The work became a product of *inner necessity*, the result of the artist's unique, personal vision, and a need, perhaps, of the new generation to prove that painting was important after its demise in the seventies. Although much of the content depicted in this imagery is related to the human experience and the society at large, there seems to exist another agenda. Neo-Expressionist paintings are bolder, larger and more ambitious than most paintings created in the twentieth century. One might ask whether the pervading aggressiveness underlying this art signaled a defensive position on the part of its creators and their need to establish credibility.

Since the activities of the seventies were essential for liberating art from the shackles of formalism, Neo-Expressionism should be viewed as yet another critical link in the process. It furthered the experimentation that the seventies artists began. There is no denying that its role is an important one, particularly in re-establishing a trans-Atlantic dialogue. As Michael Brenson states in *The New York Times*:

*The contribution Neo-Expressionism has made is substantial. While the art scene had become international, and while the mass media had penetrated American cultural life — both educating the public and turning every authentic search and struggle into entertainment and promotion — the art of the 70's was inhibited by the dogmatism and anti-commercialism of the 1960's. There continued to be a way to make art and a way to think about it. As a result, although there was plenty of sound and fury, and some fierce and eloquent sound and gestures, mainstream art as a whole seems, in retrospect, to have been caged in. It did not have a great deal to say about what it meant to be alive at a particular moment in time . . . art now jumped back into the world with both feet.<sup>2</sup>*

The full impact of Neo-Expressionism is too early to determine; however, already it has become apparent that artists in the eighties are freer in both their selection of subject matter and its execution.

Today's abstract art may appear quiet and tame after our exposure to the bravado of Neo-Expressionism. But abstract art does not purport to be either a social alarm system or a theatrical spectacle reverberating with psychological intensity. In much of the artists' works size is not monumental, and color and surface application have become vital elements in establishing individuality. Eighties abstraction appears to have become a private quest and a summation of multiple references.

#### References

1. Jane Addams Allen, "Letting Go," *Art in America* (January 1986), p. 100.
2. Michael Brenson, "Is Neo-Expressionism an Idea Whose Time Has Passed?", *The New York Times* (January 5, 1986), Section 2, p. 24.