

Marjorie Welish

Essay by Elaine A. King

E.M. Donahue Gallery

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An exhibition of paintings on view
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E. M. Donahue Gallery
560 Broadway
New York, New York 10012

COVER:

Small Higher Valley 6, 1994

BACK COVER:

Small Higher Valley 7, 1995

I think there are two parts to painting: There are the things you can control, and the things you can't. You hope that the things you can control...the knowledge you have...the background of experience, is built up to the point you can trust it. And something surprising comes from this trust when you confront it with the things you can't control.

—Mel Bochner¹

AFRAID OF RED, YELLOW & BLUE?

Artists working in our era continue to blur the boundaries of form and content—and, for that matter, of definition. The overt oppositions found in genuine avant-garde art appear to be collapsing. In our anti-object, anti-painting climate, it is difficult to conceive that abstraction was a vital, authoritative visual language in European and American art of the twentieth century. Although the term abstraction has been ambiguous, the history of abstract art has all along encompassed a compendium of issues—in dialogue. Mel Bochner's statement appropriately applies to much abstract work: "I believe painting is an argument with history. It exists in a certain time, and what happens affects what you do."²

As in past decades, a new definition of abstract art continues to evolve. In the last twenty-five years, abstraction has argued metaphorically for multiple structures, processes and points of view. At its core, it is neither exclusionary nor reductive; it is synthetic, freely examining a spectrum of conditions and knowledge beyond the thing we call the object, as it sets out many strategies of ideological representation. However, in this PostModern time, with socio-political issues presumably outweighing all other themes, abstract painting or any art that does not attempt to mirror society's flaws, is viewed suspiciously and relegated to the category of passé Modernism. A relevant query of the moment might be: Does abstract painting fit into the contemporary art dialogue? During a period of abounding ideological absolutes, dictating that art must be social savior to rectify the world's problems leaves contemporary abstraction to become a step-child. Perhaps we should consider this: Artists

1. Mel Bochner, quoted in Elaine A. King, "Building a Language," in *Mel Bochner: 1973-1985* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1985), 14.

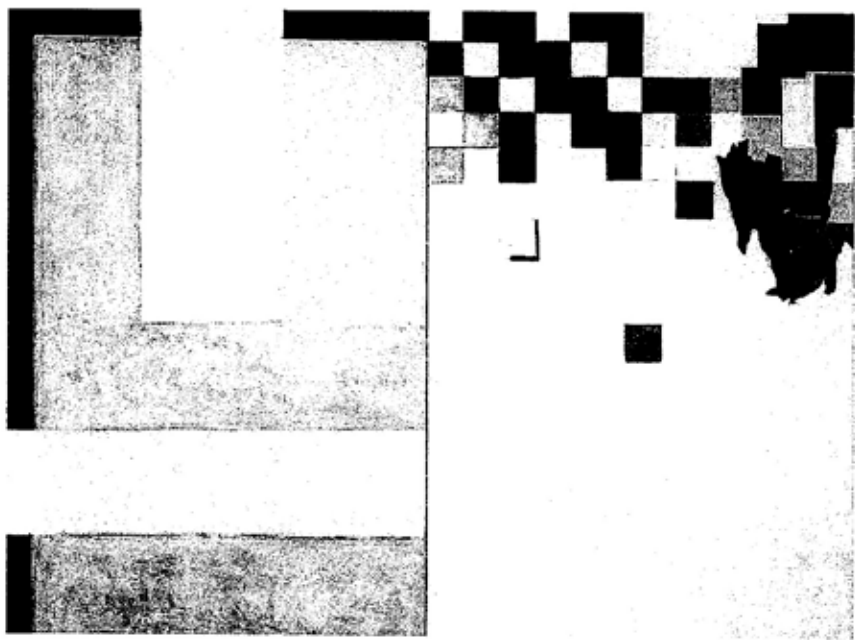
determined to continue unleashing the potential of abstract art despite the minimal acceptance or recognition for their endeavors can be viewed as the "dissident" artists of their time.

The intellectual yet eccentric, tightly constructed paintings of Marjorie Welsh stand as curious anomalies in the mid-nineties. For one thing, they incorporate the grid. Celebrated in Modern art but despised by Post-Modernists, the grid is put in place only to become the point of departure in Welsh's studious structural and operational game. Multiple lines of inquiry evolve simultaneously within the two adjoined canvas fields that function as a single unit. Welsh's acute comprehension of past Modernist movements is vividly apparent: issues argued by Malevich, Mondrian, and Newman prompt her complex structural amalgams of form and color. However, it is important to note their concerns about the sublime are void in this artist's painterly analysis. As she recapitulates the strategies of Modernism and locates these within a network, she neither cynically deconstructs its values nor demonstrates any nostalgia for its passing. Contrary to other contemporary painters unhooking the grid, Marjorie Welsh's rigorous investigation is not parody but post-structuralist problem-solving. If there exists a kindred spirit to whom she aligns her respect and approach to art making, it is the artist Mel Bochner, who for over two decades has wrestled with building a "language"-oriented abstraction based on ideas from set theory and analytical logic.

Throughout her practice, Welsh takes liberties to skew, reframe and shift elements for the sheer purpose of painterly analysis. In doing this, she acknowledges the contributions of Modernism as underlying creative extension in late twentieth century art. Slipping the grid—reframing or unraveling it—is not defensive but offensive. "The apparatus of Modernism," Welsh has stated, "is deployed here to refer to an ongoing arthistorical dialogue.... To refute it is to deny our inherited visual language and foundation. Be that as it may, modern formalism is integral to even the significant Post-Modernist response. Inherited aspects of Modernism define the issues of Post-Modernist consequence."³

Welsh's strategic paintings allow elements of chaos to interfere with the calculated constant passage of red, yellow and blue appearing as a com-

3. These remarks by Marjorie Welsh are taken from a conversation between the artist and the author on February 10, 1995, in her studio at the International Studio Program, in New York City.



Small High Valley 57, 1994

monplace. The artist once wrote, of a series begun in the mid 1980s: "In recent phases of 'Small High Valley,' the principle of similarity appears as a constant and commonplace of modernity. Painted red, yellow and blue, as though a flag, one quadrant of the composition remains invariant, or nearly so, from painting to painting. This is the 'classic' modern reduction of painting. So rare is its adulteration in my work, so frequently does it appear as a fixity, that tactical change within this passage comes as a surprise."⁴

Elsewhere is chaos—or if not chaos, then recuperation of structural potentiality. Characterizing the artist's production is an unwavering adventure. Canvases shown in 1993 were more organic and amorphous, and these newer works evince a more linear method and morphology. Nevertheless, through Welsh's investigations a connective thread links her cerebral works from one period to another, notwithstanding many overt formal and conceptual shifts. Nothing is really discarded; things recycled are only pushed into other zones. Under the artist's initiative, the primary colors of red, yellow and blue prompt qualified transposition and a gradual—or sudden—metamorphosis. Conspicuous throughout her practice is a steadfast cerebral intensity, yet evident also is the hand of a "mad" scientist who takes zany risks. Disorder is an order invited into the scheme. Welsh's employment of the diptych format as a structural construct continues to provide an essential underlying scaffolding. It physically dramatizes the structure unfolding conceptually on the surface. The diptych announces an aesthetic of difference emerging from the abutment of the two supports.

Labyrinths and frames are synthesized from the horizontals and verticals in red, yellow and blue and invading black and white. Reconfigurations produce new areas of focus. In the piece titled *Small High Valley 57* a single, white square floats illusionistically in a vast yellow sea. Most minimal in application, it is powerfully effective in activating the composition. Part of the intrigue of this work and others is the blatant use of Modernist color, particularly the aggressive presence of yellow. Welsh's use of primary colors alerts one to the language of Modernism. At first glance one tends to believe he or she has detected the conceptual strategy underlying this series of paintings and may opt to conclude that this work is just another exercise in deconstruction. Upon closer

4. This quotation comes from an artist's statement sent to the author by Marjorie Welsh. Written in the spring of 1992, the statement continues to apply to new work.

scrutiny, the visual information remains more relative and elusive: The viewer does not know quite what she is looking at and must begin to engage in a larger visual dialogue with the work.

The chromatic and gestural details reveal an intellectual rigor made subtle through intuitive intimacy and invention. Despite Welsh's carefully planned plays, what results is an unexpected conceptual fluidity that unsettles the inherited fixity of chromatic commonplaces and releases the potential inherent in the decentralized grid. One is alerted to this artist's contrary sense of humor through her use of red, yellow and blue as subject. The enigma that remains is: What really inspires these abstract puzzles? Is it a metaphoric parody of the virtues of high Modernism? No, that's too simple: Despite this, things here are not so elementary!

Elaine A. King
February 1995