

# **Marjorie Welsh**

Essay by William S Wilson

E.M. Donahue Gallery

**Marjorie Welish**

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An exhibition of paintings on view  
from June 3 through June 30, 1993

E. M. Donahue Gallery  
560 Broadway  
New York, New York 10012

Cover:

*Small Higher Valley 1*, 1991

Back cover:

*Small Higher Valley 3*, 1992

"like an unlikely couple..."

—Marjorie Welsh, "Bodiless, Bodiless in Translation I"

Each of these paintings by Marjorie Welsh begins with two identical canvases which are joined together. A vertical line between the two canvases shows where and how they are separated, and how they are joined. Duality is a given: *one*, and then the other *one*. Both. Given that one material part (or style or rhetoric or system) is *next to* one other material part (or style or rhetoric or system), none of these pairs of two is to be merged into the oneness of one seamless canvas. Nevertheless unity and wholeness do arise, on the plane of aesthetic illusion, which is not the same as physical unity and which is consistent with material twoness. Two or more components, irreconcilable or at least irreducible each to the other, yet constitute a single event.

Because the given material twoness is subsumed in aesthetic wholeness, the paintings suggest that a person does not begin in a primal unity or oneness to which one might seek to return for consolations. The hypothesis is that a person arises in the midst of regular sectionings, which are to be thought about, and many irregular discontinuities, which cannot but be felt. Then one must, by thinking with something like a grid, and feeling with something like brushy colorful paint, work out the wholeness. In these paintings, such wholeness does not close, as though into a unity which is like a necessary conclusion, but holds itself open in coherent self-accord. Because no duality is papered over or covered up in a false continuity, the paintings are not like those ideologies which paper over contradictions in order to apply a single total system which could dominate the whole of everything.

Two raw canvases, adjoined, open a side toward the painter (and toward the spectator). Painter and spectator are to work out a mode of combining with the work of art, which is a model for how parts of an event combine to make a single whole event, and for how anyone is to combine consciousness of an event with the physical forces in the events. One of the hopes in Romanticism has been, and sometimes continues to be, that subject and object will merge in an identity beyond any alienations. Such a process opens with two—subject and object—and closes with *one* when the two have merged in an identity, as with William Blake: "He became what he beheld." Such a process, in which two essences would merge into one essence, now seems as unlikely as undesirable.

To look at a painting, as to look at a model of how to join the world as it is to the world as it should be, is to see a theory of how events should be structured. A criterion of visual truth as self-validating structure does not allow the painter to offer, or the viewer to accept, the falsification of discontinuities smoothed into a continuum.

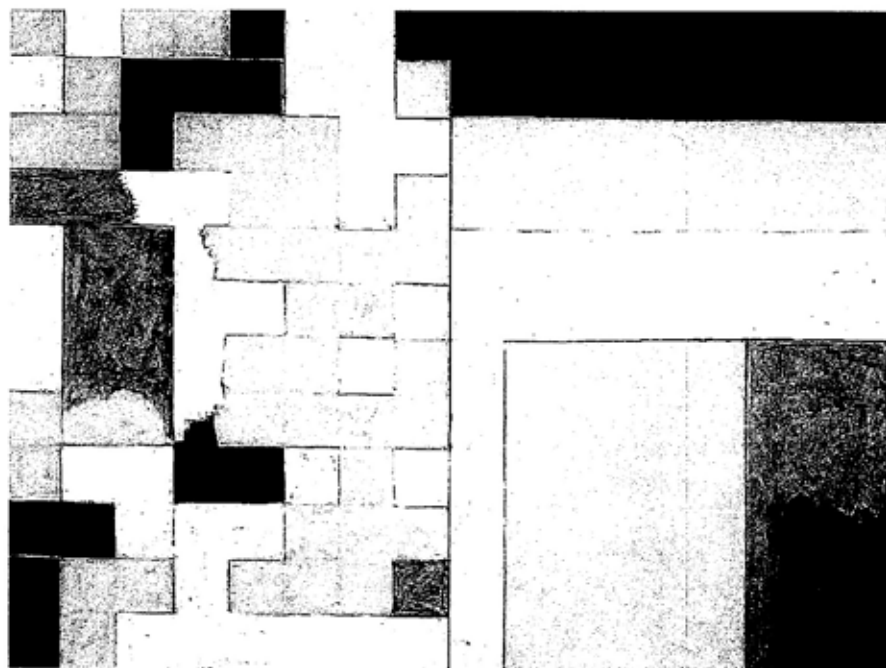
Alternatively, when separate and incompatible parts are adjoined in a unified structure, the structure is the larger for subsuming the incompatibilities. Such paintings, as they confront separateness and singularity, negotiate matches among mismatches, coordinations among uncoordinations, and agreements among disagreements. Then, at their best, reversible abstract operations (like the reversible geometric sectionings of a grid) work in tandem with irreversible feelings which are trying to find out what they are.

The parts of the paintings achieve their unity across wide intervals which could be, but which are not, narrowed for easy transitions. Given: not a continuum, but wide intervals among red, yellow, and blue. An occasional green, or orange, or light blue, suggests what has been removed from a full continuous spectrum from red through violet. Relations among red, yellow, and blue remain open to recombinations once their arrangement is not determined by the spectrum. The colors can even be painted over each other, as yellow can be painted over blue to yield, slowly, a greenish light. The colors have relations of being *next to*, but also temporal relations of before and after, or earlier and later.

The gap between red and yellow, or yellow and blue, is, as a gap, an omission or deletion which is a kind of negation. But that negation is seen as positive when it functions as an *interval* between red and yellow, or among red, yellow, and blue. Intervals are opportunities. Wide intervals among colors show that we are in the midst of discontinuities, not within a continuum, and paintings which use colors with such intervals offer visual adventures among wide intervals and other discontinuities.

When the structure of art is prescribed as organic wholeness—that a work of art should be like an organism—then, as with an organism, possibilities get used up and yield to probabilities, and probabilities close in necessity. In an organic structure of necessary interdependence among parts, the possibilities of the acorn are fulfilled and concluded in the oak tree which was determined from the beginning, barring accidents. In the contrary structure which uses two or more systems, the paintings can accept accidents like a splash or a paint-drip because the paintings have the indeterminateness of a flexible field which can reshape itself around such accidents as would have destroyed an organism. Alfred North Whitehead describes a field as “...the interweaving of the individual peculiarities of actual occasions upon the background of systematic geometry.” Let *field* be an image for these structures in which fairly objective thought and fairly subjective feeling work out how to be next to each other without either one destructively dominating the other.

Field has the advantage of suggesting all-over composition, or use of the whole canvas, without the problems of hierarchy which emerge in figure-ground rela-



tions which make corners and edges subsidiary to a focal center. Still, consciousness of the field is not part of the field, but is as though within and without the field simultaneously. One of the great impulses to unity as cosmic unity or oneness of a totalizing field is conveyed in the frustration of Henry Adams: "The universe that had formed him took shape in his mind as a reflection of his own unity, containing all forces except himself." American art through Abstract Expressionism frequently attempted to solve precisely that problem of dualism through identifications of subject and object, or painter and painting. But by now, in 1993, the advantages of two systems, of dual control, have been demonstrated visually for almost forty years. A useful image for the relations between the two of such dualities is the hinge, which is *between* as a function which holds apart as it holds together, and prevents one part from dominating or controlling the other part.

I have written about some issues of "Abstract Painting" in an essay illustrated with a reproduction of *Small High Valley 42* (*Artspace XVI*, May 1992). My generalizations were intended to describe Marjorie Welsh's paintings, among others, so I will quote a bit of myself: "Some paintings shift gradually from one system into another—changing one set of rules for another set, with overlappings. Other paintings display discontinuities within the work—even physical discontinuities as when two or more panels are joined into units but do not adhere. The units of panels don't need to coincide with units of color, or to be congruent with the units of brushstrokes. A system such as a grid can co-exist with another system which is now on one side of the grid, now on the other; so systems can even interpenetrate without having to become one system."

I usually use quotations from philosophy not as explanations, but as fairly opaque planes from which to deflect sympathetic light onto painting, in what can be a reciprocal illumination of philosophy and painting when painters are seen to be people who are thinking at the edge of a system of beliefs, and/or who are feeling at two edges between two systems of beliefs. And here I quote, as I did in an essay entitled "and/or: one, or the other, or both," from a meditative essay by Thomas Nagel, "Subjective and Objective" (*Mortal Questions*). In Nagel's argument, neither subjectivity nor objectivity is reducible to the other: "The task of accepting the polarity without allowing either of its terms to swallow the other should be a creative one. It is the aim of eventual unification that I think is misplaced, both in our thoughts about how to live and in our conception of what there is. The coexistence of conflicting points of view, varying in detachment from the contingent self, is not just a practically necessary illusion but an irreducible fact of life."

William S. Wilson  
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