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Breaking and Entering

By Marjorie Welish 9/24/09



For getting a grip on the New York School and what became of it, go see the exhibition of David Novros' compelling paintings from the '60s, now in its last week at the Paula Cooper Gallery; his early paintings prove indispensable to understanding the reception of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko.

"Getting a grip" is indeed the apt phrase for these assemblies of L-shaped panels, each placed as though to construct a painting that has the character of an inevitably set lattice. Part painting, part sculpture, the lattice serves the artist's purpose well, for it emphasizes the palpable stuff of stretchers, canvas and pigment—materials from which a painting is built. Making a painting do the job of a wall was a legacy of the New York School's color-field abstractions, and Mr. Novros "nails it."

An untitled work from 1965-67 is definitive. Six panels configured stepwise comprise an open square painting, in earthy earth tones. Somber, decidedly making a point of avoiding an agreeable beauty, this work captures the attention and remains interesting long after the first glance because the syncopation of color against structure falls counter to our expectations. Playing structure against color is indeed Mr. Novros' secret compositional tool. Perhaps that is why an untitled later sequence of panels lacquered in tints of green, blue and red does not read as trivially decorative against the vast gallery wall. In fact, the entire show succeeds where some other shows in the space have failed: Whether small, medium or large, Mr. Novros' paintings are rhetorically scaled to their painting practice and not overstated by hanging in the gallery's cathedral-like surrounds.

Quantity can effect a qualitative change, as it does with Mr. Novros' decision to increase the number of artistic variables. Fifteen panels—some rectangular, some not—placed in a triple-tiered array distribute their color more freely, and yet, the more complicated the orchestration, the less intense the whole. As substantial as the more recent works are, the curious phenomenon is that they relinquish their grip on sequencing for structure and go for animating a wall with a syncopated effect that now does have the unintended consequence of looking like décor.

"David Novros," is on view at Paula Cooper Gallery, 534 West 21st Street, through September 26, 2009.

BREAKING DOWN A painting into its components in order to build it again or build it differently may be something we take for granted, but in the '60s this practice was a major force for refreshing the art. To celebrate its 35-year anniversary, Sperone Westwater has mounted "Zig Zag," an international group of post-Minimal, Arte Povera, and a Conceptual art—the gang trespassing on the domain of painting and sculpture as we know it, and making wrong moves seem the right ones.

For some artists the issue was whether painting and sculpture could be brought together in the same object without compromising the independence of either medium. In *Zig Zag* (1966), a witty work that is “spot on,” Aligiero e Boetti proves it possible: dyed fabric, itself a surrogate for painting, zig-zags through a frame and so usurps the sculptural prerogative of occupying space. The question of whether sculpture can be made to issue from nature has yielded many works interesting in the way they elude form or design yet are compelling nonetheless. Especially important for this sort of sculpture are negative casts—that is to say, cast negative spaces, as Mario Merz had done, in an untitled work from 1968. Now displayed atop iron stands are wax chunks taken from the tree limbs’ in-between spaces. The point being: Don’t imitate nature; collect or gather nature. Or induce form from other people’s intentions. The conceptual artist Douglas Huebler created a hitchhiking project determined by the destinations of the drivers who stopped for him, the results of which he documented, as *Alternative Piece #1* (1970).

More singular and rarely seen works ranging from good to terrific, by Carl Andre, Jan Dibbets, Joseph Kosuth, Bruce Nauman and Richard Tuttle, among others, celebrate this long-lived gallery that excels when it plays from strength.

Along with choice works gathered for “Heinz Mack: Paintings, 1957-1964,” “Zig-Zag” may be seen at Sperone Westwater, 415 West 13th Street, through Sept. 26, 2009.

AN ARTISAN IN everything he does, Jack Whitten’s love of craft is apparent in his current show at Alexander Gray Associates, with mixed results. In the main gallery are recent paintings. Colorfully striped panels painted in a variety of textured effects lack conviction, despite the claims made for them—indeed because the claims of being derived from military insignia seem frivolously realized. In the back gallery, however, is a knockout work, *Zeitgeist Traps* (for Mike Goldberg) (2009), in which all Whitten’s talent is mobilized in a memorial for a fellow painter.

“Jack Whitten” is on view at Alexander Gray Associates, 526 West 26th Street, through Oct. 17, 2009. .

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