

View of Marjorie Welish and Olivier Gourvil's collaborative exhibition "Paper Architecture/Architecture de Papier," 2005; at the Slought Foundation.

to art-making as a back-and-forth discussion. Welish is known for making abstract paintings that favor the diagram as a site where modernist problem-solving takes place. Gourvil's paintings resemble abstracted signage. He has held exhibitions where he requested titles from viewers, in order to open up the meanings of his works.

Titled "Paper Architecture/Architecture de Papier," a reference to the working out of ideas by architects through plans that remain unbuilt, the exhibition was a result of conversations going back at least five years. After the pair decided that their collaboration would not involve working together on the same drawings, Welish devised an approach inspired by the end-of-painting scenario, "Newman closed the door, Rothko pulled down the shade and Reinhardt turned off the light."

The artists began trading concepts, via e-mail, of imagined structural plans that might, Gourvil told me, "find new territories in painting" by exiting the closed-up "house of painting." Some of these concepts were written on the walls of the vault, such as "Door through wall/ Door throughout wall" or "Porte ouverte/ Porte fermée." Others, such as "Atrium in Shadow" and "Hold that beam!", were e-mailed to Gourvil by Welish. Gourvil made rubber stamps of some of Welish's phrases and these appeared on his loosely propositional graphite drawings. The stamped phrases seemed to anchor the structural wooziness that characterizes Gourvil's working drawings, balancing them with the more stiffly rendered lines of the drawings that Welish submitted.

of approximately the same size by the Swiss abstractionist Helmut Federle. Welish's pristine, architectonic paintings, with their blue and yellow or turquoise hard-edged fields incised into a white ground, contrasted with the two comparatively murky, expressionist Federles. The latter hung in an alcove at the other end of the gallery with their dragged lines of brushstrokes on a dark ground. Though it was immediately apparent that these two artists' works had certain classically modernist issues in common, their distant proximity within the space seemed appropriate.

—Joe Fy

They decided to display the drawings laid flat under glass on drawing tables and on other tables set on low stacks of cinder blocks, elements that extended the house-and-room theme. The work also cohered through color. Though it was never discussed, the artists discovered that they had both used only yellow paint in their works on paper. The entire installation, with its low tables, understated drawings and playfully odd phrases, lightly handwritten on the walls by both artists, came across as a contemplative intersection of word, structural notation and physical environment.

More recently, in an exhibition at Baumgartner Gallery in New York, about seven of Welish's small acrylic-and-ink paintings on wood panel, hung salon style, were paired with two canvases

Marjorie Welish

Essay by Elaine A. King

An exhibition of paintings on view  
from April 29 through June 3, 1995

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 Bochner<sup>1</sup>

## 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."<sup>2</sup>

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 Post-Modern 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

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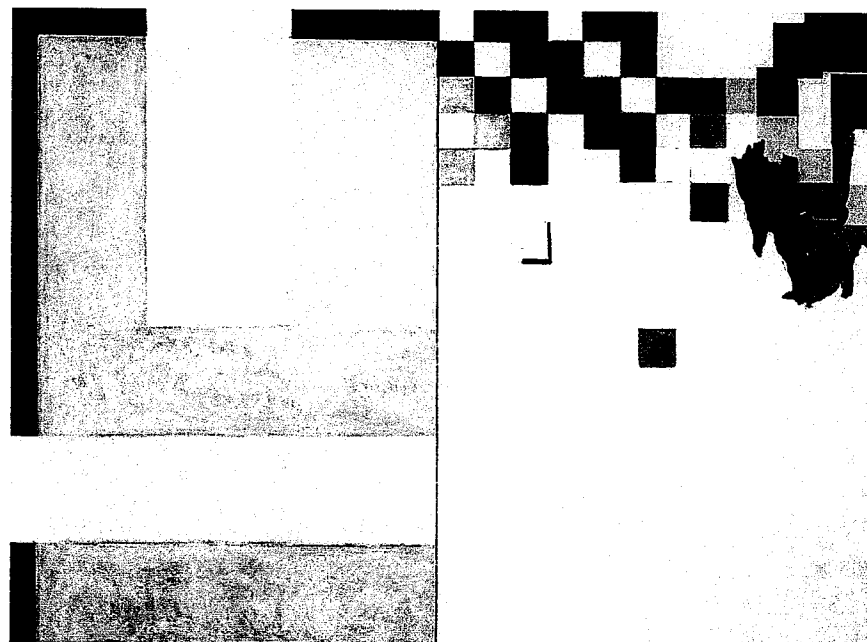
1. Mel Bochner, quoted in Elaine A. King, "Building a Language," in *Mel Bochner: 1973-1985* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1985), 14.

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 unhinging 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 art-historical 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."<sup>3</sup>

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.

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."<sup>4</sup>

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

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

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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.

“like an unlikely couple...”

—Marjorie Welish, “Bodiless, Bodiless in Translation I”

Each of these paintings by Marjorie Welish 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.

## Marjorie Welish

Essay by William S. Wilson

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

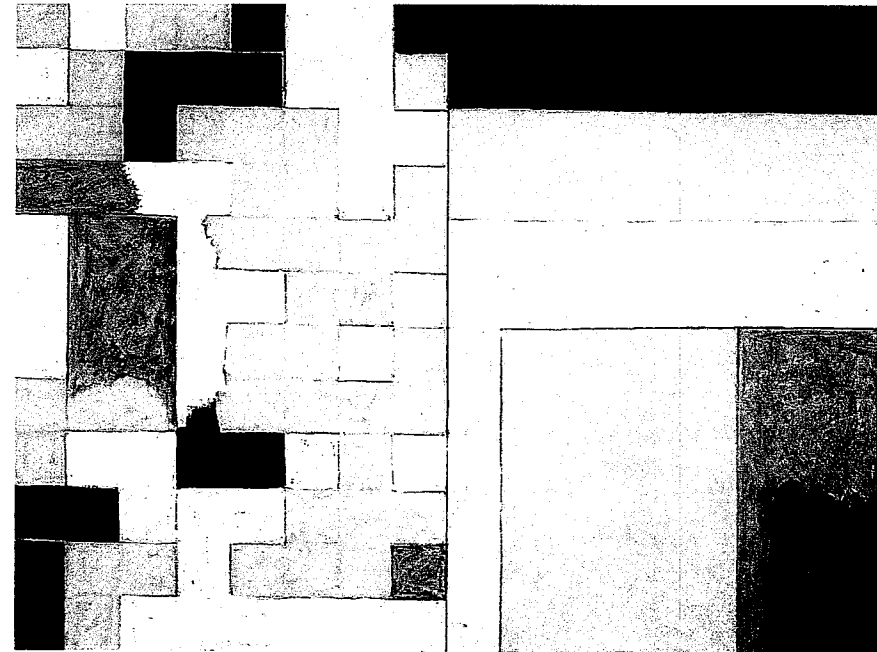
Alternatively, when separate and incompatible parts are adjoined in a unified structure, the structure is the larger for subsuming the incompatibilities. Such paintings, as they confront separateness and singularity, negotiate matches among mismatches, coordinations among uncoordinations, and agreements 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  
New York  
April 1993

*Photography:* Kevin Not  
*Printing:* Enterprise, Inc

**Marjorie Welsh's** Neoplastic palette and structure takes on modernist history. Her logical yet provisional configurations are open or maze-like, making relationships mutable like a puzzle or tangram. Thus Welsh's compositions are less finite essences and more like propositions. They balance on a conditional order, a kind of glossary of style with limits. Chaos disrupts the stability in a thoughtful, non-expressionistic indifference to heroics.



## NEW YORK ART CRIT

By John Haber, New York City

Latest News and Reviews

### DIAGRAM OF DISORDER

Painting is taking pains again, so why not abstraction? From the almost painful detail of Alexander Ross's humanoids as green slime to the endless derivatives of album-cover art, a little muss and fuss seems to sell. Perhaps it stems from a search for respectable ancestors even for kitsch. A wave of backward glances, from the retrospective of Elizabeth Murray to "High Times, Hard Times," has allowed the 1970s to get all over the walls and floor, but still in big fields of color. This spring, however, came something at once messier and more finicky, starting with runny stripes by Juan Usié at Cheim & Read and Dan Walsh at Paula Cooper.

They looked not unlike Ken Noland stripped of all that talk of objecthood. Could it be that pattern and decoration never had to break with color-field painting after all? And then I started to remember those around me in college, who took for granted the search for more intricate geometries. They spoke in the same breath of Brian Marden and Robert Smithson—the desire to make painting speak for itself and the desire to map disorder—and a heretic like Peter Halley just made the outcome a sociopolitical statement. Ancestors like these disrupted "mere illustration" and "pure painting" alike, and the terms still meant something. Attention to detail meant attention to the limits and possibilities of art.

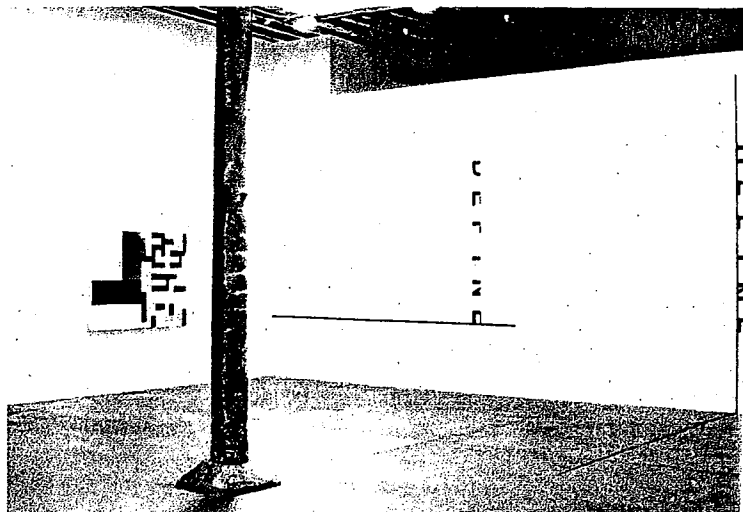
Thomas Nozkowski has been attending to detail for some time now. One could take his abstractions for still life, microscope slides, or simply studies in how one form leads to another. Curved shapes tend to have harder edges and larger boundaries than rectangles. Opacity together with overlays allows one to view the central shape as object or part of the ground. In his April show at Pace, the artist let curves repeat more frequently across the canvas rather than center upon it. The sheer number of small works made their designs seem more subjective.

Perhaps the disconnect between Pace's lavish quarters and the scale of the art diminished it for me, but still at the level of everyday disappointment rather than unintended comedy. The New Museum dares Tomma Abts to remain halfway visible at all. In its large box, perhaps three times the height of a museum guard and all but devoid of natural light, it allows her exactly fourteen easel-scale abstractions through June 29. They hang evenly spaced at eye level but with a single gap, as if the German artist could not quite finish the job. She might shade her less than dense patterns, like an Op Art recreation of Robert Delaunay. Or she might let them stand, as a boast that purity can accord with *anti*-formalism.

Work like this trusts the artist's impulse in a way that art immediately after color-field painting did not. For someone like Robert Mangold or Marjorie Welish, the challenge is still for detail both to catch and to disperse attention—to pursue painting both *for* itself and as critique *of* itself. The elements of Welish's new paintings, at Biörn Ressel through June 7, certainly look familiar, but that is part of why they matter as Abt's or Ross's cannot. The small panels and sheets of unmounted paper include color rectangles, relatively neutral white areas, pen tracings, and washes. Bars may favor unpredictable angles, or bands of primary color may hug, echo, or supplement the frame. The details can carry weight because they do not take the ground for granted as a preexisting structure.

The elements could belong to architecture or, as Welish calls the show, "Painting as Diagram," but a diagram of what? The point is that the question matters. Painting here can serve as a diagram of imaginary structures, of their experience, of the gallery, or of painting itself, or it can mean painting as essentially schematic without referring to anything at all. All this sounds like a stem lecture in structural linguistic, but leaving the options open keeps the work at a remove from its own apparent formalism. Moreover, while individual works are rather discreet about their refusal to play ball, the salon hanging really lets loose. The scattered fragments, like randomly placed windows onto a larger space, make the gallery itself the diagram.

Installation view of "With/Without," showing (left) Marjorie Welish's *The Without IX*, 1999, oil on canvas, 4 by 5 feet, and Peter Downsbrough's *DEFINE/OR*, 2001, black tape and stick-on letters. dimensions variable; at Baumgartner.



cerns and expressions to invite discrete consideration (*without*). Welish presented five easel-scaled oil-on-canvas diptychs and Downsbrough offered two wall works in black vinyl letters and tape adjusted to the gallery's architecture; the interests of each artist were illuminated by a sensitive regard for the nature of the other's work.

Two of Welish's 3-by-4-foot diptychs opposed three 4-by-5-foot works across the room. Ostensibly modernist abstractions, they consist of optically charged rectilinear patterns of internally opposed two-color and three-color systems. By way of example, rectilinear T- and L-shaped passages of predomi-

those lines. The elements could be understood to express a physical assessment of the site, as well as to provide a broader reference to the conditions probed by Welish in her paintings.

On the gallery's far wall, the letters of the first word of Downsbrough's proposition *DEFINE/OR* had been cut in half lengthwise and the upper half installed vertically down the gallery wall, split in such a way that the upper half seemed to belong to the verb "refine." Further along the wall, the lower half of what appeared to be the same word read, instead, "define." They were connected by a line of black tape adhered directly

to the floor and proceeding from the wall, attached to the conjunction of the title, OR, like flagpole and pennant. With the constituent letters optically reassembled by the viewer, the words read as "refine or define," suggesting another possible reading of Welish's exercise in opposition. Both artists acknowledged the contingent nature of the exhibition and their material relationship to the site itself, in these days of formal courtesy.

—Edward Leffingwell

### Marjorie Welish and Peter Downsbrough at Baumgartner

The systemic paintings of Marjorie Welish and the drawings of Peter Downsbrough performed à deux in the exhibition "With/Without," cross-referential enough to justify the conceit of their pairing (*with*), and sufficiently separate in their connotatively red, yellow and blue oppose other similarly configured passages of black and white, neither one dominant and each compositionally and chromatically complete on its own terms. In the midst of the geometric rigor of the systems, Welish calculatedly abandons an occasional passage of color in mid-stroke, leaving the incomplete remainder as a gesso-white salute to the still unfinished, historic project of abstraction.

Downsbrough, a resident of Belgium, is known as an early practitioner of a reductive, materially based conceptual art involving the broadly referential use of various elements of language—concerns associated with Lawrence Weiner and Robert Barry. He adhered lines of black tape parallel to the gallery walls and floor, and deployed stick-on letters to form English-language conjunctions and verbs in relation to

# Weekend

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 19, 1997

## ART IN REVIEW

**MARJORIE WELISH, "New Paintings and Collaborative Drawings,"** Donahue/Sosinski Art, 560 Broadway, at Prince Street, SoHo, (212) 226-1111 (through tomorrow). A group of highly intellectualized paintings that — using multipart geometric modules and a bright but limited palette — ring variations on a range of chosen but sometimes unplanned options. Sudden changes in form and color, discontinuities in structure, teasing figure-ground relationships, the interruption of geometry by free-form brush strokes and other devices give a gamelike character to these works. But the game, although of high surface appeal with its mostly primary colors and deceptively simple forms, is dauntingly complex (Glueck).

was a highlight, but the only work of hers I had ever seen, and one of the few in the exhibition I chose to remember. And so it was a delight for me to discover there are lots more, and just as good, maybe better, up at Donahue/Sosinski: variations on the square.

I still am amazed that the straight edge, the ninety degree angle in our post-Mondrian world, can be so various, original and persistent to challenge the contemporary artist. And Welsh's work is a challenge set that its solution melds the technical questions into wonderful work: complex, colorful — can one say charming? — and intense. Each painting is divided into two parts, each is made of squares, some not as "finished," the odd slur and curve, but all are bright yellow, blue and red, and now novel colors are sneaking in.

Despite the straight edge, the exercise offered and the exercise solved, the school of the square and the shadow of the past, these are very special, not like Scully whose paintings are bigger, and Welsh's far brighter and more intense, not like the children of Mondrian, Diller or Bolotowsky, and once seen not forgotten.

And this is a comfort in troubled times that a painter would paint deep within a narrow current, would set out exercises to solve, would have committed so much before the consummation begins, and yet in the end have walls filled with such fully-realized, different, demanding, and powerful works, not novel, but most assuredly spectacular, not a graceful nod to a long tradition, but contemporary work for contemporary times.

These paintings are painting-size, not huge, but, alas, just too large to sneak out under a raincoat. And they are very much the thing one would like to take home to savor, a square meal for leaner times.

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## Majorie Welsh

New Paintings and

Works on Paper

Donahue/Sosinski Art  
through December 20

BY J. BOWYER BELL

**M**ARJORIE WELISH'S painting in Bill Bace's 1995 Salon des Refuses exhibition  
*Semaphore: Placing the Mark in Tribeca*

# Art in Review

■ Art with art  
history ■

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**Marjorie Welish**

*E. M. Donahue Gallery  
560 Broadway (near Prince Street)  
SoHo  
Through Wednesday*

Marjorie Welish mixes a lot of art history into her dense, airless, resolutely unpretty geometric paintings. They combine Mondrian's primary colors with the grid-based, systematic approach of Minimalism and add sufficient stylistic quirks to claim a spot in the painting-about-painting "conceptual abstraction" of the last few years.

Ms. Welish works in a diptych format. Typically the left-hand panel is a field of small equal squares, while the divisions of the right-hand panel are large and irregular. Blue and yellow or red and yellow are sometimes mixed on the canvas to produce irresolute oranges and greens. Here and there, brushy strokes stray outside their linear confines and obscure the demarcations between squares, creating mazelike single-color bands that lead nowhere in particular. The effect is something like Mondrian with his rhythm thrown off, his meticulous surfaces punched out and his utopian program — so dependent, it suddenly seems, on sheer visual grace — short circuited.

Short circuiting modernism and its utopian certainties is what a lot of recent painting is about. Particularly interesting is the sense of childlike precocity of much of the work. The cartoon-derived painting so visible at the moment, for example, takes a brash Dennis the Menace approach to tradition, amusing and irritating at the same time. Ms. Welish's work suggests a different sort of child: earnest, studious, older, whose notion of play is to tirelessly vary a single formula as if that alone would yield new results. In unspectacular ways, it does. By the sheer doggedness of her efforts she seems to both distance herself from her sources and accept them with unsentimental conviction.

HOLLAND COTTER

is is is	primary is is	what is is
is is p r i m a r y	is primary	<b>what is primary</b>
is is what	<b>primary is w h a t</b>	is what
is primary is	primary primary is	<b>what primary is</b>
is primary p r i m a r y	primary primary	what primary primary
<b>is primary what</b>	primary primary w h a t	primary what
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<b>is what p r i m a r y</b>	what primary	what what primary
is what what	primary what w h a t	what what

KS

MARJORIE WELISH

*Study for Small High Valley 52, 1992, oil on paper, 9 x 12 inches*

## GALLERY-GOING

## Spanning the Geometric Spectrum

By JENNIFER RILEY

Painters Marjorie Welish and Ann Pibal both make geometric abstract work, but they are opposite in nearly all aspects of intention, approach, and affect.

**MARJORIE WELISH:**  
*Painting as Diagram*

Björn Ressle

**ANN PIBAL**

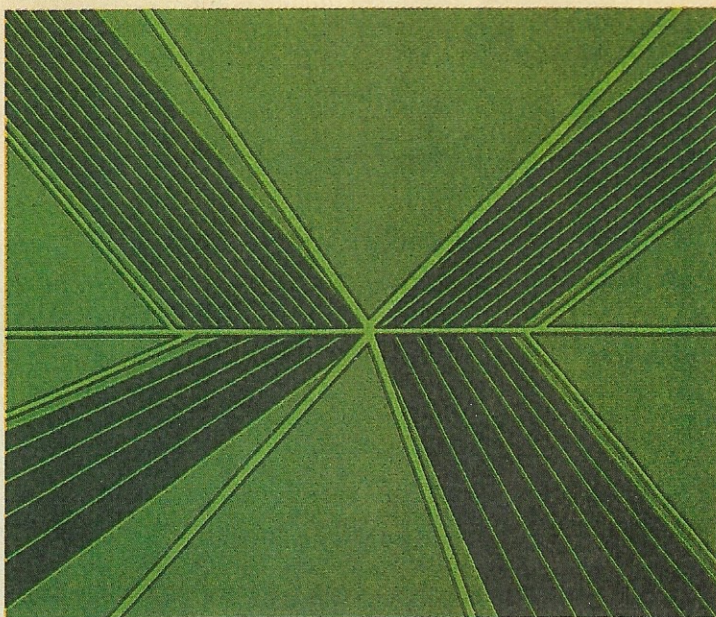
Max Protetch

Ms. Welish is a New York-based poet, critic, and painter whose current show, "Painting as Diagram," at Björn Ressle features easel-size, sharp-edge, pristine Modernist paintings. Since the late 1970s and early '80s, Ms. Welish has done paintings in response to historical paradigms informing Modern art, and this exhibit is a continuation of her research in art in which she considers how art might be read as well as seen.

The show brings together three recent series of paintings that demonstrate the artist's fascination with different levels of meaning and different levels of language. The work recalls architectural plans, ideas, and schema; it includes many diptychs with information that radiates from the right and left panels, with the gap between often integrated as line or color. These are intellectualized yet playful and witty paintings, ordered with a language of line and geometry. The forms, shapes, grids, and primary colors recall Modern masters such as Mondrian, Malevich, and Rodchenko, and the conceptual conceits bring to mind American contemporaries such as Johns and Lasker.

The salon-style installation works particularly well for the newest series of works, titled "Blueprint," which has 15 panels in combinations of triptychs, diptychs, single-panel pieces, and works on paper. Here, many aspects and elements of an idea are presented simultaneously, underscoring the chart-and-graph-like characteristic of the project's title, "Painting as Diagram."

One of the understated achievements is how the colors succeed in a range of duties: Sometimes they create sensory perceptions, or yield conceptual solutions, or yield pragmatic solutions. In "Indecidability of the Sign: Red, Yel-



MAX PROTETCH

Ann Pibal, 'FTHRWT' (2007).

low, Blue 22," for example, a thin strip on the right edge of the painting is divided into three equal parts announcing the primaries red, yellow, and blue. In that location, the colors look like samples of themselves.

Ms. Welish paints with an economical collection of mark types and techniques ranging from scribbling and smearing to careful painting of taped-off shapes, areas, and lines. Smears are not gestures, and lines show little evidence of the artist's hand. Like architectural drafting, which is codified, Ms. Welish's vocabulary is far less expressive and intuitive than it is a rich, analytic, and systemic corollary of thought.

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Ms. Pibal is also a New York-based artist; her solo debut at Max Protetch offers 14 small- to human-size, surprisingly colored acrylic paintings on aluminum. The compositions are made using a range of geometric motifs, with images that recall such diverse sources as album cover illustrations and fragmented views of architectural structure. Yet it is her expressive and articulate use of color that sets this work apart.

Ms. Pibal layers one or two systems over a machine-smooth, colored ground using a grammar that implies space or atmosphere, and compositions that suggest views from different vantage points. A sense of motion and distance is achieved by skewing the fragmented rectilinear structures so

they appear to be leaning, folding, or at times receding with the use of strong perspective lines. In the large painting "AERIE" and in the intimately scaled "BNKRS," red frame-like structures are shown as if captured by the artist in mid-step as they animatedly attempt to slip offstage.

Titles are often given to paintings with corresponding images. "Pool" for example, is a large painting from 2007, with a luminous, chemical-blue ground color that is divided horizontally by a section of a striped structure. It recalls a swimming pool, albeit imaginatively and abstractly. Some titles, however, such as "FTHRWT," "QTTRO," and "CSDN" — apparently ordinary words minus the vowels — are meant to underscore the notion that the work approaches this same condition of evolving language without locking into a fixed statement.

Ms. Pibal's paintings playfully engage abstraction's short but loaded history. Her use of striped motifs, concentric Xs, and thin lines inscribing space and outlining forms brings to mind signature moves of American artists such as Frank Stella, Feitelson, Krushenick, and Frederick Hammersley, yet Ms. Pibal has carved out a new space for herself. In their subtle animation of geometric form and the uncanny coupling of unnamable colors with a believable sense of light and atmosphere, these paintings feel like direct, celebratory responses to being in this world at this time.