New York Scene
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The hidden agenda of biomorphic or representational abstraction, beyond the recapitulation of life forms in abstract painting, is a recapitulation of the mind. These psychological underpinnings are particularly evident in Carroll Dunham's current work at Sonnabend: eight paintings plus a series of drawings in which large, blob-like figures are foregrounded on a field of Twombly-esque scrawls and notations.

Dunham is previously known for his wood grain paintings, which placed him among contemporaries such as Terry Winters, Gary Stephan and Ross Bleckner, and among younger painters such as George Condo, Lydia Dona, Bill Kornoski and Willy Heeks, as a figurative abstractionist rooted in the morphologies of nature. Dunham's former plywood paintings, with their accentuated delineation of grain and knot, were optical enigmas blinded by science: drenched in illusion, déjà vu (or presque vu), and in the detritus of drug store psychology (Rorschach tests, eye charts). His new paintings also invoke the blandishments and iconography of pseudo science, but through the exploration of a singular form, a dynamic and expansive shape. Dunham has, at least temporarily, abandoned his encyclopedic appraisal of diverse styles and effects in favor of an idée fixe.

The large, single colored protagonists that squirm and squiggle across the tableaux evoke Philip Guston as well as Dr. Seuss. They are cartoonlike, with a dark outline that is unevenly filled with color. These grotesque vegetal/mammalian forms, somewhat pornographic in their effulgence of flesh, evince a polymorphous playfulness of bulges, lobes, loops and other epidermal appendages that seem engaged in some sexual cataclysm, apocalyptic struggle, or perhaps...
in a deflation of circumstances. Surrounding the protagonists are elegantly distressed field of scribbles, half rendered notations and graffiti-like markings. If a narrative can be implied, this text is seemingly expelled in the wake of the levitathan, like so many angry exclamations and asides. This dense field of markings recall Cy Twombly, but is also derived from Dunham's earlier work, and suggests scraps of laboratory notes that were somehow instrumental in giving birth to the beast within. Weird science, indeed.

At the risk of obvious biography, Dunham is recently a father, and his current tendency towards a childlike playfulness and polymorphous exaggeration of form might reflect family circumstances. But however, one accounts for the genesis of these (pro-)tuberous shapes in his work, Dunham's current paintings are masterful. Executed on paper, which is then mounted on panels, they retain the immediacy and volatility of the painting into two texts, one concerning the means of its own making, and the other its presence as an object, elements that had previously been expressed or denied were made apparent. These elements—the polarity between diagram and surrogate, between the dictates of the formal object and its allusion to the exterior world—create an ongoing dialogue that in itself becomes the subject of the painting and of its critical discourse. "Implicit in this discourse is that object, experience and meaning are not reducible one from the others... These artists structure their works to make us acutely aware of the simultaneous and often contradictory signals that they are sending. Their paintings place the viewer in the role of an interpreter rather than a passive receiver of the truth."

This new conceptual abstraction has many practitioners, of whom Ostrow selects twelve for Diagrams and Surrogates: David Diao, Lydia Dona, Moira Dryer, Jack Goldstein, Mary Heilmann, Richard Kalina, Bill Komoski, Jonathan Lasker, Thomas Nozkowski, David Reed, Gary Stephan, and James Welling. These artists are well known to a New York audience. Many show regularly at other galleries in the city. What makes this exhibition particularly seductive is the implicit presentation of a new New York school of conceptual abstraction.

The twelve pieces in the show proceed from a pronounced stylistic diversity. Included are: Dryer's archly dandyish wooden construction of a signature maze; Goldstein's computerized, luridly-colored, neo-geo conflagration; Diao's post-Malevitch ideogrammatic puzzle; Nozkowski's and Lasker's figure ground meditations; Stephan's elegant pleonasm of shape, shadow and tone; Dona's dark exploration of a plasmic, mottled field; Welling's host of superimposed black circles; and Heilmann's neo-minimal yet expressive rectangular geometries.

All very different, yet together they share a speculative, open ended approach to sources of imagery, a willful obscurity that distorts seamless interpretation and fixed dogma, an ability not only to embrace but to render contradiction eloquently, to juxtapose seemingly discordant elements of text and subtext. These paintings suggest a distanced, ironic counterpart to the abstract
formalisms from whence they spring. They are tremendously self-knowing. They are smart art.

In articulating a dialogue between interior and exterior concerns, the work in *Diagrams and Surrogates* invites critical scrutiny not only of the objects themselves, but of the terms we use to give them meaning. “As these paintings demonstrate the impossibility of fixing meaning, they reveal that a change in context is not a change in content, but a way to retrieve certain aspects of experience from obscurity.”

What this exhibition rescues from obscurity is the potentiality of a New York school of abstraction for the late 1980s. In fact, several of the paintings, previously seen in one-person shows and in other contexts, acquire greater resonance and depth in their present company.

What better claim can be made for a group show?
Even had his death not occasioned a retrospective, it would have been a fine time to re-evaluate Warhol's legacy in light of contemporary developments such as commodity and media reflexive art, which pay similar obeisance to issues of commerce, consumption and economics that Warhol was introducing into the art parlance of the 60s. His embrace of banality and consumerism, of the pervasive and superficial, and of the serial, repetitive nature of the cultural icon, are now touchstones of art practice.

Warhol held up a mirror to society and reflected back who we were and what we wanted to see. Through this strategy of passive reflection, he became the first art superstar, creating a role that many would try to emulate in succeeding years. Call it Zen or call it calculated: Andy forged a unity with all aspects of our media society, and bridged the gap between the museum and the corner shop. He branched out as a magazine publisher (Interview), an impresario of music and performance (Exploding Plastic Inevitable/Velvet Underground), a filmmaker (with a readymade cast of superstars). If his serial paintings suggested the raw material of cinema (24 frames per second), so conversely his films projected a quirky static quality (48 minutes of the Empire State Building).

His use of mechanical reproduction (silkscreen) created an endless, seemingly effortless accumulation of images, an onanistic litany of Marilyns and soup cans. For Andy, a Czech Catholic from Pittsburg, it was the formulation of a new pop hagiography: the icons of our age were being hammered into immortality through the sheer dint of their repetition (a single canvas with hundreds of coke bottles, a series of canvases each with a slightly different Mao, reproduced in off register silkscreen). The facility with which his projects entered both the high art sphere and the sensationalism of the tabloid press, the alacrity of his burgeoning celebrity, and the hyperrealization of his serial commodities, which became immediately identified with the product name of "Warhol" — all offer elegant testimony to the firm finger he had placed on the heartbeat of American life. It was no accident that he named his studio The Factory, a locus for the mass production of objects, dreams and desires. For Andy, more was, in fact, more.

This said, it is paradoxically his earliest, hand painted work (before he learned silkscreening technique from Robert Rauschenberg) that carries the greatest resonance — perhaps because it is less familiar (not as widely exhibited and photographed) or because it indicates an incipient aesthetic in formation. The commercial drawings of shoes for I. Miller (some in gold leaf), the early paintings of comic book heroes (Superman, Dick Tracy), of dance step diagrams, nose jobs, newspaper headlines and advertisements, strike us as most remarkable, revelatory and affecting. They offer a glimpse of Warhol before he was WARHOL, and allows us to be present at the inception of the most remarkable career in contemporary art.

Steven Kaplan

NOTE
1. All quotes from Saul Ostrow's catalogue essay. © 1989 Shea & Beker