

The NEW YORK Sun

THURSDAY, MARCH 1, 2007

ARTS & LETTERS

Abstract Poetry on 25th Street



THREE CHELSEA EXHIBITS OFFER BEST ABSTRACT ART IN NEW YORK CITY

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Within the same block on 25th Street, three compelling exhibits — Joan Snyder at Betty Cunningham, Bill Jensen at Cheim & Read, and Deborah Rosenthal at Bowery — currently offer a sampling by some of the strongest abstract painters in New York today. Like the best representational artists, these three painters immerse themselves in their themes. Yet, working metaphorically and purely abstractly, their art is not as well understood as it could be.

Throughout history the best painters have always been poets. Titian, Rubens, and Renoir — three masters of the nude — did not paint their subjects. They explored them. They let their imaginations unfurl around the theme of the nude — around the mysterious qualities of flesh and desire, nature and eroticism, the sacred and the profane. These artists do not give us the appearance of flesh. They give us the feelings that flesh inspires.

As with poetry, paintings are constructed out of metaphors. A
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Bill Jensen's "Smelt" (2006) is on view at Cheim & Read Gallery.

CHEIM & READ

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painting's content ultimately is conveyed not through the recognition of objects but through the experience of form. If the painter is good, he has set the emotional stage. He has created a world — be it abstract or representational — where the full range of his theme is made available to viewers.

Yet, as much as abstract painting and representational painting have in common, they speak different languages and have different structures. Representational painting grounds us in the continuity of our three-dimensional world. Abstract painting is not beholden to the world — the space — in which we live. Abstraction can move fluidly between numerous realms simultaneously within a single picture. It can explore past and future, inner and outer — its images registering like flashes of memory.

Unfortunately, many celebrated contemporary painters confuse or try to ground their abstractions in representational frameworks. In the end, these paintings, neither abstract nor representational, leave viewers stranded in a never-neverland that neuters both representational and abstract painting.

Last fall, the Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted a large show devoted to Sean Scully, whose abstract paintings, titled "Walls of Light," are made up of stacked vertical and horizontal rectangles. Mr. Scully's pictures can be luminous, but, without formidable frontal pressure, they behave chiefly as stacked blocks in a wall. Mimicking forms in our three-dimensional world, their movement is primarily vertical and lateral. The rectangles never free themselves from the forces of gravity or from their post-and-lintel trappings. Nor do the forms fully pulse forward or back, to create rhythm and tension in the plane. Compare his paintings to the elastic space of Paul Klee's magic square pictures (also made up of rectangles), in which the plane is reminiscent of a wall but also of a membrane, a night sky, a weaving, a checkerboard, a children's drawing, stained glass, and a city seen from above — to name just a few.

Brice Marden is another abstract painter whose most recent work is wedded more to figuration than to abstraction. In his MoMA retrospective, which closed in January, Mr. Marden's colorfully tangled ribbons spread across mural-size canvases. His gestural noodles on colored grounds amount to little more than decorative flourishes on ornamental wallpaper.

BILL JENSEN: PAINTINGS

Cheim & Read

Ms. Snyder wears her heart on her sleeve, working on an epic, symphonic scale. Bill Jensen, by comparison, makes haikus and parables and offers windows into violently heated worlds. Rarely working larger than 4 feet, his canvases are of internal spaces, magnified and brought to light.

His current show is really two exhibits in one. The front gallery comprises four very dark canvases of smoky, fleeting forms in graphite blues, slate blacks, and deep rusts. The paintings, with titles such as "Abyss" and "Ashes," push darkness about as far as it can go without being altogether formless.

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If the first gallery is like the charred aftermath of a volcanic eruption, the other two galleries are like walking into the fire. From canvas to canvas, Mr. Jensen moves masterfully from the lightest of step to a full frontal attack. "Voodoo Child (Jimi Hendrix)" (2005-06) is hot and wild, an in-your-face assault of blood-red flames. Many others, such as "The Sleeper," "The Five, The Seven (The Scream)" (both 2005-06), and "Bacchus" (2004-06) convey an everything's-in-the-soup mix of expressionistic outburst and controlled heat. Their swaths of color are as alive as the swirling trees of Soutine, and they dance, layer, and intermix, pushing ever-forward to the plane, as well as, also, opening ever-inward. The effect is that of a beautifully teasing space in which you are invited in and pushed back simultaneously.

Other works relate back to his paintings based on the light and atmosphere of Asian art and calligraphy. "Luohan (Space)" (2004-06), "Luohan (Light Step)" (2003-06), and "Luohan X" (2005) can be as brief, soft, and delicate as the best calligraphic characters, and as blunt and frontal as a Franz Kline. In "St. Sebastian" (2005-06), a milky-white bone-like form has the presence of a head set afire. Held in the plane, it is reminiscent of an explosion, a compound fracture, and an artifact frozen.