

GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY

# ARTFORUM

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WILLIAM ANASTASI

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If, as a subject, blindness has been pervasive in contemporary art, it has been nearly as ubiquitous as a method of production. Robert Morris' "Blind Time," drawings are perhaps the best-known examples of the pursuit of art through the deliberate denial of vision, a willful and fascinated magnification of the moment of blindness inherent in any ordinary gesture, as if distending this moment would, paradoxically, make it visible. The earliest and certainly the most sustained explorations of this kind, however, are the "unsighted" paintings and drawings that William Anastasi began back in 1963 (just one subset of an unusually various oeuvre).

Until recently Anastasi has applied his discipline of sightlessness quite strictly; he would consider a piece complete after a predetermined amount of working time had elapsed or when a given mass of materials had been exhausted. Only at that point would he view the results. By contrast, Anastasi's five new untitled "Abandoned Paintings," 1994-95, are less systematic: they are still painted "blind" but the artist stops to look at them periodically in order to decide whether to continue painting or to "abandon" the work.

Since they register the artist's conscious taste, the "Abandoned Paintings" are more "traditional" than his earlier unsighted paintings, but this series as a whole has never been all that far from orthodox esthetics—the hand is as much a factor as the eye in determining pictorial sensibility. Anastasi's interest in using strict systems and constraints to divert the conscious mind and evade its habits has clearly been encouraged by his long friendship with John Cage, but the result is quite distinct from the lightness or impersonality associated with the late composer's work—it is of a more restless, human, psychological nature. The pathos always remains to some

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730 FIFTH AVENUE  
NEW YORK NY 10019  
TEL 646 336 7183  
FAX 646 336 7185  
WWW.GERINGLOPEZ.COM

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degree that of a history that has been almost annulled: it is the tension between the anxiety of influence and the attempts to evade it. The elegant scrawl of Anastasi's mark-making, his rhythms of accumulation and dispersal, the abrupt alternations between fierceness and play, inevitably recall Cy Twombly, but beyond that the "Abandoned Paintings" are darkened by the murmur of innumerable paintings, by "somatic memories of paintings" (as Harold Rosenberg once put it) that no amount of indirection or surveillance can suppress.

While Anastasi has mitigated the import of sightlessness in the process of making these works, he has not failed to "make the visible a little hard to see," as Wallace Stevens put it, by literally darkening the paintings to near colorlessness. Executed in diverse blacks (oil and graphite), they are legible as much through texture as through their slight differences of shade, with the reflectiveness of graphite converting the surface to functional whiteness. And then by hanging the five paintings contiguously, as though they comprised a single work in five panels, Anastasi has deliberately amplified their cumulative impact at the expense of their considerable individual nuances, which viewers must work hard to excavate from the offhand sumptuousness of these works.

—Barry Schwabsky



William Anastasi, *Untitled IV (Abandoned Paintings)*,  
1985, oil and graphite on canvas, 89½ x 74"