

ESSAY

by Colin Gardner

"If the doors of perception
were cleansed everything
would appear as it is, infinite."

William Blake

PAULA CRAWFORD, CHRISTOPHER
FRENCH, CHIP RICHARDSON AND
ROBIN ROSE AT NUMARK
GALLERY.

Perhaps the most significant legacy of so-called "post-studio" practice of the past thirty years is that painting has long ceased to be regarded as an exclusively visual medium, appealing to a predominantly ocularcentric discourse. The lessons of minimalism, conceptualism and recent body-based approaches to perceptual experience have forced us to relocate painting less as a catalyst for Enlightenment notions of the beautiful and the sublime than as an interactive site, a meeting place of several, often antinomous esthetic trajectories. A painting can now be simultaneously viewed as a purely retinal experience, defying the logic of rational discourse; an agglomeration of semiotic codes that can be read as well as seen; a three-dimensional material object occupying a shifting, perceptual space-time; as well as a tactile, phenomenological experience appealing as much to the haptic, productive capabilities of the body as to the limited parameters of vision per se.

A common denominator linking the otherwise dissimilar artists discussed here is their shared acknowledgement of painting's potential as an evanescent multiplicity. In all four cases, conceptual, retinal, linguistic and haptic concerns are

held, to varying degrees, in an open-ended tension, so that a given painting is never reducible to a single dominant trope. Instead the viewer is forced to undertake a perceptual line of flight, to temporarily expand and fill out the work's formal and structural contradictions with a projective leap of faith before restoring it to its necessarily contingent state.

In Paula Crawford's *Fugue* and *Invention* series, for example, characteristics normally associated with the emotive excesses of the baroque or expressionism -- decorative filigree, sweeping gesture, and tactile impasto -- are both foregrounded and deconstructed, all the better to reconstitute painting as a simultaneous site of both bodily and conceptual pleasure. Thus, while Crawford's underpainting alludes to the all-over qualities of abstract expressionism, this baring of gesture qua gesture is counterpointed by the work's representational surface, which evokes minimalism's concerns with serial repetition. In the *Fugue* series, for example, this takes the form of delicately woven motifs appropriated from fragments of Renaissance lace, while the more recent *Inventions* resort to a recurring, lattice-like structure that suggests squat, Gothic windows, reinforced by a concurrent series of semaphore-like triangles. In both cases, the repetition of the pattern encourages the viewer to project it serially beyond the confines of the canvas to form an infinite web of endlessly repeating signifiers.

However, although this serial architecture ensures the structural integrity of painterly surface, Crawford also draws us into the limitless depth of the work through a series

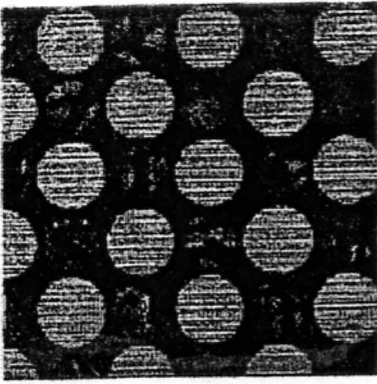


Paula Crawford
Invention/2
1997, oil & wax on canvas, 45" * 60"

(click on the thumbnail for a larger view)

of perceptual sleights of hand. Thus, in *Invention/2*, while the rows of triangular forms point alternately to the left or the right across the painting, subverting the stasis of the latticed grid with two opposing movements, they are also overlaid by smeared vertical strokes in a pinkish white. This diaphanous foreground veneer serves to fold the surface optically into the expressive gesture of the background, so that, at the very point that Crawford forces us to "read" the structure of the painting through the established vocabulary of the Renaissance grid, we find that our textbook guidelines are in fact fugitive roads to a singularly perceptual deceit.

Chip Richardson extends this willful destabilization to the painting's linear structure itself. Starting with sweeping, arc-like gestures over the entire surface of the canvas, this somatically-based ground is quickly reined in by a variety of superimposed geometric grids that resemble micro-organisms of larger, more expansive structures. These outline geometries are filled in with a series of impastoed brush strokes forming tightly-knit horizontal bands with sufficient space between them to allow portions of the background to show through. In *Lattice* (1996), for example, vortex-like swirls in orange and yellow are anchored by a seemingly infinite grid of



W.C. Richardson
Lattice
 1996, oil & alkyd on canvas, 60" * 60"

(click on the thumbnail for a larger view)

impastoed circles. The background movements appear to be in fixed orbits around the individual "globes" but closer observation shows that they are in fact spiralling off into nowhere. Not only does the work's linear structure prove to be unstable in and of itself, but its constant push-pull between positive and negative space leads to a retinal indeterminacy, creating dazzling ghost images that add to the perceptual erasure of the painting's literal structure.

However, unlike Crawford's largely centrifugal trajectories, Richardson's movements are tightly confined by the painting's edge, creating a centripetal push back into the interior of the painting where the work ultimately collapses under the pressure of its own compositional weight. This dialectic between the optical and the haptic is what gives the work its dynamism: a constantly shifting cat-and-mouse game between figure and ground, weight and transparency, center and margin, compression and decompression. It's a combination of difference and deferral that, while alluding to an ideal conceptual space outside the confines of the canvas, can only be played out on its material surface.

It is this very tension between the materiality of the painting as an object and its immateriality as a pictorial experience conjured and invented by the viewer, that Robin Rose calls the viewer's "remote sensing" of the work's inherent contradictions. Rose paints on 18 x 24" Hexcel panels, 1/2-inch thick aluminum sheets with a honeycombed interior commonly used in aeronautics. This medium allows the artist to combine a

newspaper-size scale, rooting the paintings in linguistic codes signifying "readability" (the chaotic skein of lines in *Soul Channel*, for example, evokes Twombly-esque calligraphies, while the predominantly beige hues and pentimentoed hieroglyphs of *Mounting Evidence* suggests a scorched palimpsest of musical notation) with a minimalist, architectural resonance. Each panel is mounted away from the wall and carefully lit to create a distinct drop-shadow, which allows it to seemingly defy its own material weight and interact, Judd-like, with its surrounding environment.

Rose covers the aluminum with linen, which becomes the ground for the painted surface itself, a combination of encaustic and beeswax. The latter are made viscous using great heat to produce a variety of surface textures ranging from smooth marble and gentle ripple effects to the Tapes-like searing and scarring of a work like *Physical Nest*, whose physical tactility provides a purely material counterpoint to the Suprematist effects of the work's almost transcendental blue-black pigments. This dialectic of the optical and the haptic also discloses a hidden durational element, for the works' different surfaces are an index of the material's relative drying times, which vary from top to bottom or center to margin depending on the nuances of the different processes applied to each painting. Edges tend to be compressions of the interiors, creating a combination of acceleration, decomposition and condensation that is both a product of the material properties of the work itself, but also a conceptual re-construction on the part of the viewer, who must recreate the no longer perceptible temporality of the



Robin Rose
Soul Channel
1997, encaustic on honeycomb panel, 18" * 24"

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original process in hindsight.

This aporetic gap between what we perceive, what we know and what we read is central to Christopher French's recent work, which incorporates Braille texts as metaphors for what he calls "the constant tension between empathy and denial... contact and distance, that is the basis of any human conversation or communication." With its grid-like permutations, Braille is not only a convenient code for visual abstraction in-itself, but also a code that contains a hidden linguistic and textual meaning when translated into tactile (as opposed to optical) terms. In *Any kind of perfection... (Calasso)*, for example, French sets up a wave spectrum dot pattern (the analytical structure of optics itself) which expands diagonally across the canvas. The Braille text forms a visual interruption of the retinal matrix, creating a perceptual "chaos" akin to the moire effects in many of French's fingerprint works, whereby the indexical sign of a unique individual identity itself becomes the vehicle for a retinal deterritorialization. The true meaning of painting thus always lies in the interstices of the haptic, retinal and conceptual, a truism reinforced by the secret meta-communicative message of the Braille text itself, for according to its quote from Robert Calasso's *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, "Any kind of perfection always demands some kind of concealment. Without something hiding itself, or remaining hidden, there is no perfection."



Christopher French
Any kind of perfection... (Calasso)
1997, oil, flashe & acrylic on wood panel, 24" * 24"

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French's work thus self-reflexively bares its own devices in order to further its own powers of mystification, a dialectic

between sense and nonsense akin to the literary models of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. Significantly, both the optic and the Braille "texts" are set against a black and white, compressed wave-like form which gives the impression of deep space, a kind of primordial matter or substance extending to infinity. However, it can also be read as a laconic sign for the brush stroke itself, painting's equivalent of a grapheme. As in the case of Crawford, Richardson and Rose, it is exactly when painting declares its ontological identity through its most basic epistemological code that it ends up being most untrustworthy. Which may, of course, be its saving grace.

--Colin Gardner

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