

MASTERS OF THE OBVIOUS

Like a house, a painting must be built. But it is also, in equal measure, imaginary. If the three painters included in this exhibition, Mary Heilmann, Jill Moser, and Stanley Whitney, are masters of the obvious, they are also familiars of the unknown. That is to say, they employ simple building materials—oil or acrylic paint, prepared cloth, a limited number of simple, roughly geometric forms—to construct images that are neither expectable nor readily explained.

All three artists are accomplished at their craft, and in the work included here demonstrate a practiced ability to find simplicity's lurking deceptions. Of the three, Heilmann is most directly engaged with the porous boundary between object and image. When three canvases are joined in a single painting, as in the early *Green Queen* (1977), with its several sets of nested squares, there is at least implicit consideration for sculptural form. That interest is unmistakable when a painting is irregularly shaped, as in the laterally striped *Pink Shoulders* (1982/2001), which derives its contours—a small square atop a bigger one—from the torsos of Kachina dolls. Even when the painting is a discrete, rectangular field, as in *Green JA* (2000), it resists simple integrity; the isolated squares and rectangles of color that migrate to this canvas's margins assert their independence, undermining the simple coherence of the whole. Indeed this painting's cryptic title points to Heilmann's impatience with pure form: the "JA" refers to John Armleder, whose work often combines utilitarian objects and painting.

Heilmann was a ceramist before she was a painter (she studied with Peter Voulkos in California, before moving to New York in the late 1960s), and has never lost interest in those functions of art that are practical as well as visual, or spiritual, or intellectual. Lately, she has begun to construct chairs as well, having long dabbled in tablemaking. But her work's center of gravity remains fixed in the domain of pigmented surfaces and in an assortment of visual facts that match visual lucidity with physical instability. In an interview conducted by Jessica Stockholder, a younger master of similarly crossbred forms, Heilmann said, "There is a kind of hybrid dimension that occurs as a result of the interplay between the object quality of the painting and the illusionistic space inside the frame." In the same interview, Heilmann expressed her interest in a further gray zone, the one between the singular and the series. "When I join two or more paintings to make a composite piece, the space between them becomes as important as the actual parts," she said, pointing to the (provisional) conversion of negligibility into significant form—and, in consequence, of two paintings into one. By extension, and even more mischievously, she is intrigued by the possibility of looking this way at the junctures and juxtapositions in group shows. "I'm just as interested," Heilmann said, "in reading across from one work to another as I am in focusing on the internal composition of each piece."

Heilmann's observations are pertinent for all the paintings in *Masters of the Obvious*, where reciprocal readings certainly reveal constructive affinities. In his luminous paintings included here, Stanley Whitney moves around blocks of color as deftly as a seasoned bricklayer, with an unerring sense of weight, balance, and fit. Some are so narrow they are hardly more substantial than the mortar-like bands of color separating them, while others are expansive enough to function as freestanding paintings. Many are animated enough to be independent fields, radiant with gestural life. But the overall compositions are indissolubly integrated, and incontestably complete. Generally, four-row arrangements are topped with relatively small blocks; typically the next row down bulges with

massive rectangles, and those at the bottom are compressed as if by the weight they carry. Whitney has spent five of the last 12 years in Rome (he maintains a studio in New York as well), and the Classical architectural infrastructure lurking in his work suggests the influence of his adopted home. The same is true of his palette, which ranges from sunshot greens to umbers, ochres, and warm browns, with dazzling squares of blue appearing from time to time like glimpses of Mediterranean sky.

The horizontal bands in Whitney's paintings are similarly restless—they do their job of setting up the blocks and keeping them in place, but lift off the surface a little, too. Often, they form partial frames at a painting's top and bottom, allying themselves with the canvases' edges as markers of objecthood (an impression made the stronger by juxtaposition with Heilmann's work). In other passages, Whitney's lines are almost transparent, abandoning their load-bearing function to become graphic, even atmospheric; in a wonderful evocation of the shifting perspectives they establish, poet and critic Raphael Rubinstein has called them "multiple horizon lines."

The play of linear elements against grounds that don't hold still is the dominant motive of Jill Moser's work as well. In her new two-panel paintings, coursing, spinning lines tease at the description of volumetric shape and telescoping spatial recession, while retaining their abstract identity as graphic ciphers. The paired linear configurations follow each other almost as call and response in the sine-wave-like patterns, first compressed and then expanded, of *plain sight*; in *middle of the world* (titled after a film by Alain Tanner that greatly affected Moser's visual thinking), the circling contours are absorbed, in some passages, into a more yielding ground. In both works, the sheer velocity of the painted line creates a rotational force equivalent to the pull more often achieved, in painting, through metaphors of gravity. Tunneling through the individual panels' fields, the spinning orbits tip and veer, suggesting horizons far more dizzying than those of Whitney's work.

While the materiality of the canvas is defied by these furiously mobile figures, it is reaffirmed by the two-panel pairings, which create continuities of surface from one canvas to the next. As in Heilmann's conjoined paintings, the juncture, paradoxically, makes the physicality of the support inescapable. Moser's work has long been engaged with the negotiation of contour and volume, of the graphic and the spatial. Here these dualities are set in an opposition potent enough to make them inseparable.

The title *Masters of the Obvious* is in the Minimalist idiom: the young Frank Stella's "what you see is what you see" is a cognate. The importance of Minimalism to each of these artists is undeniable (if widely varied), but its invocation also helps clarify crucial differences with the later work. Fact and fiction were held at arm's length in the 1960s, and ambitious art partook only of the former. In the work exhibited here they consort promiscuously. The point is not so much that material truth is now a suspect category, and that every objective datum can be challenged—this is hardly cultural news—but that the fictive no longer provokes censure. Indeed, in our famously destabilized age, the imaginary hides everywhere in plain sight—and seldom more plainly than in this exhibition.

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