

To Hold the World in Mind

Stephen Maine

Fabricating objects that simultaneously function as abstract paintings and give voice to her political convictions, the young American painter Rebecca Ward confronts one of the central challenges facing abstraction in the early 21st century: to engage, in concrete terms, the contingent relationships that unfold *outside* the studio's walls. Ward's stance is that of the artist-citizen who applies her knowledge and abilities to a particular lineage of painting while being aware of the opportunities such a pursuit provides to address broader social concerns.

This she does by means of materials and procedures specific to a domestic realm of activity that has long been coded female, thereby infiltrating the historically male-dominated field of geometric abstraction. Though Ward well understands her art-historical roots, her paintings bristle with the complexities of contemporary life. Working in the real-estate cauldron of New York City, leading a necessarily peripatetic existence far from the Texas landscape of her youth, she turns alienation to her advantage in these anxious, skeptical objects and imbues them with an inarguable sense of presence. Even at this early stage of her career, Ward is clearly in command of what Meyer Schapiro describes as "the imaginative aspects of the devices for transposing the space of experience on to the space of the canvas, and the immense, historically developed, capacity to hold the world in mind."

Channeling laundry-day chores, *rocky mountain oysters (diptych)* includes washes of dark gray dye liberally splashed with bleach, which effaces the pigment and yields a ghostly reverse image of that autographic mark essential to the Abstract Expressionists' sense of pictorial self. Further, the warp of the canvas fabric is removed from half the painting, leaving only the weft—exposing the centrality to the painters' craft of the art of weaving, a stereotypically feminine endeavor. The diptych's title refers to a regional delicacy, roasted bull calf testicles (a.k.a. "cowboy caviar"), and humorously aligns the familiarity of hearth and home with fears of castration.

Other paintings sport fringed edges, as if leading double lives as rugs or comforters. Ward comes to painting from sculpture and installation, so it is unsurprising that she is alert to the materiality of painting's traditional components. Even when she stretches her canvas it maintains a sculptural dimension, as in *blue steel*. Combining a reductive configuration of alternating stripes reminiscent of Daniel Buren's Situationist-inspired, painting-like interventions in urban public spaces with a field of arbitrary crinkles and folds resembling a mountainous region as seen from high above, perhaps the artist gently mocks painting's defining "figure and ground."

Ward has studied those moments in postwar art when esthetic blades were sharpened on the stone of social consciousness—when artists defined themselves in opposition to a set of systems in which their participation was taken for granted. In "Notes for a Guerrilla War" (1967), Germano Celant celebrates the *Arte Povera* artists and calls for "the return to limited and ancillary projects where the human being is the fulcrum and the fire of research, in replacement of the medium and the instrument." Such a "project" thus follows a political impulse as well as a personal one, by which the artist/subject asserts his or her self as a voice of critique. Ward aligns herself with this critique, and also with the strategies of the Supports/Surfaces painters, who fused their enthusiasms for Matisse and Mao by adopting many of the materials and techniques used by the proletariat of the south of France. Distinguishing themselves from their Paris-based contemporaries, they bleached, sponged, and bundled their paintings, hung them from clotheslines, draped them over fences... modeling production and display after aspects of everyday Mediterranean culture.

These artists are among Ward's precursors, but painting titles such as *snakebit* and *amarillo by morning* and *bareback riding* and *cow tipping* point to Ward's origins in Texas. The influence of that milieu on her work is strong though visually understated. These paintings are upfront about themselves, completely candid, not cloaking their material urgency in refined craftsmanship or color harmonies or any of the other niceties that politer paintings offer. The quietly dazzling *empire ranch*, for example, is a spatially complex field of white and whitish stripes and nesting chevrons that seem to simultaneously interlock and disconnect; preventing the viewer from being transported to another dimension of disembodied visuality are nasty holes burned through the canvas with bleach.

Thanks to Kandinsky, landscape has been embedded in abstract painting since its inception. A recent trip Ward made to Iceland manifests in her paintings in a certain topographical feel, a sense in which their surfaces are scrubbed and stripped to their structural essence. On reflection, the artist credits Iceland with prompting a desire to consider her production in relation to the natural environment—that is, to go about the process of selection, manipulation, and presentation of materials as someone for whom the health of the planet is an artistically generative force. The viewer would be mistaken to scan the paintings for narrative clues to that effect; if we accept that these are paintings first and foremost, any message or content is embodied in the artist's attitude toward her process. Ward told me, "they're abstract paintings—that's what I'm interested in. But I'm a person and I do have all these other interests that play into the work. I hope that's what abstraction is moving toward...there's been such a resurgence of abstraction, and wouldn't it be great if the ideas we talk about in abstraction had a greater significance?"

Ward is at present a New Yorker and, like many of us who have transplanted ourselves here, she continually adjusts her expectations of herself according to how much time and space is available. Her studio is smallish, and so are most of her paintings. They are lightweight, portable, easily stored or lent to friends for safekeeping. They are made with a minimum of tools, and with easily transported supplies. Hers is the typically itinerant life of young New York artists who, in a relentlessly escalating market for living and working space that rewards high rates of turnover, must devise ways to sidestep the necessity of a permanent base of operations. In these circumstances, many artists find it difficult to work. Ward, for whom the space of experience and the space of the canvas converge, thrives in them.

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