



Sherrie Levine.  
Photo © Ken Collins.



Peter Halley.  
Photo © 1987 Timothy Greenfield-Sanders.

# Talking Abstract

## PART TWO

*Once more in the foreground, abstraction is now being practiced by a self-conscious group of younger artists who exploit the vocabulary of modernism, but who reject their predecessors' claims to originality, autonomy and purism.*

**INTERVIEWED AND EDITED  
BY LILLY WEI**



Tishan Hsu.  
Photo Tom Warren.



Nancy Haynes.  
Photo © Robert Mapplethorpe.

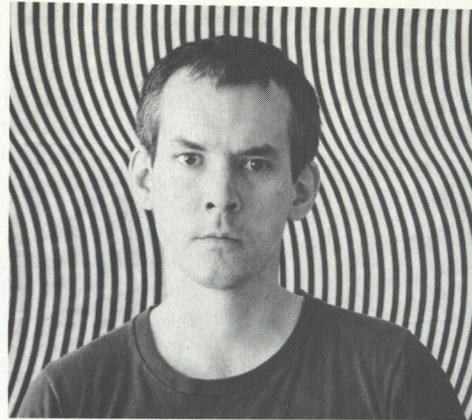
*Art balks at being defined, for it is a historically changing constellation of moments.*  
—Theodor Adorno

In sequel to "Talking Abstract, Part I" (see *A.i.A.*, July '87), nine artists—Moira Dryer, Peter Halley, Nancy Haynes, Tishan Hsu, Sherrie Levine, Peter Schuyff, Philip Taaffe and Wallace & Donohue—are here interviewed. As with the first installment, the particular selection of artists was mainly a function of the desire to present as full as possible a range of viewpoints, since multiplicity of motivation and practice again seems to be—paradoxically—characteristic. Which is to say, the "new" abstraction, as seen in the works of these artists, comes in several guises; they are not a group with a common cause. Yet, with the exception of Nancy Haynes, who continues to be a late-modernist painter, they have all put the modernist impulse at a certain distance, meanwhile retaining much of its vocabulary.

Hal Foster wrote that the "natural surface of modernist painting has been displaced by the thoroughly cultural, textual site of the postmodernist picture"; for the works of most of these artists, this is true. Peter Schuyff, for one, prefers the word "picture" to "painting," given the latter term's host of generally unexamined implications. Moira Dryer uses geometry to suggest landscape, still life and other representational forms of art. Peter Halley, widely considered to be one of the most cogent theoreticians of postmodern abstraction, says his work is about the "relationship of abstraction with the technological and socio-economic systems of our times." Abstraction now subsumes even representation, as geometry shifts from pure form into the realm of the referential—into figure and sign. The work of art is seen not as something autonomous, privileged and singular, but as contingent—a radical departure from late modern-



Moira Dryer.



Philip Taaffe.

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ism's advocacy of purity in art. For the artists of the postmodern generation, the concepts and conflicts of modernism have been largely absorbed. It was not so much that modernism had failed; rather, "modernism," as Jurgen Habermas described it, was "dominant but dead."

Some of the issues raised in the interviews revolve around the resurgence of interest in abstract painting—in geometric painting particularly, as well as in a "new" Minimalism and a "new" Conceptualism. Is the cooler art of the "New Abstractionists" merely a reflex reaction to the often flamboyant subjectivism, emotionalism and heroic stance of Neo-Expressionism, or does it have more profound significance? How does it stand in relation to the modernist tradition of abstract painting? Are these artists antimodernists? What do they think of the strategies of appropriation and simulation? Of the questions of authorship and originality? Is theirs a position of resistance? Of subversion? Does the new abstraction adequately reflect contemporary life? How? Walter Benjamin stated that "painting simply is in no position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience." Is this true?

For the most part, these artists have adapted abstraction to their own concerns; it is a vehicle. Moira Dryer says that she uses the "tradition of geometric painting" but is "not interested in it as a pure form of abstraction. Instead, it is a language to combine with other languages." Peter Halley by implication denies that he is an abstract artist, but if his work appears abstract, it is because "abstraction is the operative force in the realm of the social." Peter Schuyff "cannot possibly see grids and checkerboards as they were seen originally." For him, they are "potentially poetic" images; for his generation, "abstraction is no longer controversial." Controversial or not, Nancy Haynes believes that it "continues to be vital and exciting . . . it

continues to have integrity." Tishan Hsu says that abstraction and representation as issues do not interest him, but that addressing them anew, if only to ignore them anew, "has been a necessary step to undermine and empty out both modernism and the myths . . . that modernism produced." Cautioning against being too simplistic, Philip Taaffe says that today's abstraction is different from previous abstraction in that it comes from a more conceptual process and is much more "ruthless and self-conscious." Wallace & Donohue talk about a "conceptual precariousness, the Idea as always teetering," rerouted into "their posture of attenuated hilarity. . . ." Sherrie Levine—like some of the others—says she is most interested in issues which have "significance beyond the art world," and sees her work as "antidotal"—something she does to come to terms with her own experience.

Finally, though, what these artists have most in common is a degree of self-consciousness and critical facility which distinguishes them from their predecessors. They also seem, to a large extent, free from the anxiety of influence. While the modernists searched for absolutes and loved their doubt, the New Abstractionists accept ambivalence, claim to discard the burdens of originality, confront the contradictions of the times, and dismiss what they perceive as outmoded and unattainable ambitions. But this is perhaps an inevitable impulse: to be in opposition to the consecrated canons of preceding generations. "Even in the most modest artists," Haynes observed, there is a "desire to extend the visual language." In their implementation of this desire, these artists, whatever their stated intentions, appear to be lending abstraction a new vitality and an expanded range of nuance. ▶

Author: Lilly Wei is a writer and art critic who lives in New York.



Peter Schuyff.

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Wallace &amp; Donohue.

Photo Lilly Wei.

**"The paintings I've been making since 1985 are more general in their exploration of the notion of originality, appropriating the concerns of other artists rather than a single specific image."**

## —Sherrie Levine

*Born in Hazleton, Penn., in 1947, Sherrie Levine attended the University of Wisconsin, Madison (BA, 1969; MFA, 1973). This year, she had solo shows at Mary Boone, Donald Young in Chicago and the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn. Her work also appeared in the 1985 Whitney Biennial and, more recently, in "Avant-Garde in the Eighties" and "Photography and Art 1946-1986," both at LACMA. Levine lives in New York.*

When I came to New York in 1975, I was interested in ideas about representation. This was during the tail end of Minimalism and Conceptualism when an involvement with imagery was considered somewhat retrograde. After a year or so, I met a group of artists who were interested in photographically reproduced imagery: David Salle, Barbara Kruger, Barbara Bloom, Ericka Beckman, Jack Goldstein, Troy Brauntuch, Jim Welling, Paul McMahon—they were a sympathetic community. At the time, I was most interested in Jack's and Troy's work because their images had such an extreme relationship to their sources; since there was very little mediation going on, every formal decision became very important.

I can't remember when "appropriation" was first used about art, but I do know that this usage coincided with the general proliferation of audio and video cassettes. Reproduction of imagery became a question of property: what is original? what can we own? You didn't need a philosophi-

cal or art-historical background to think about these issues; they had significance beyond the art world. I'm interested in the ways in which the art world reflects culture and, at times, epitomizes it. I believe that the most compelling art-historical issues also have meaning outside the art world.

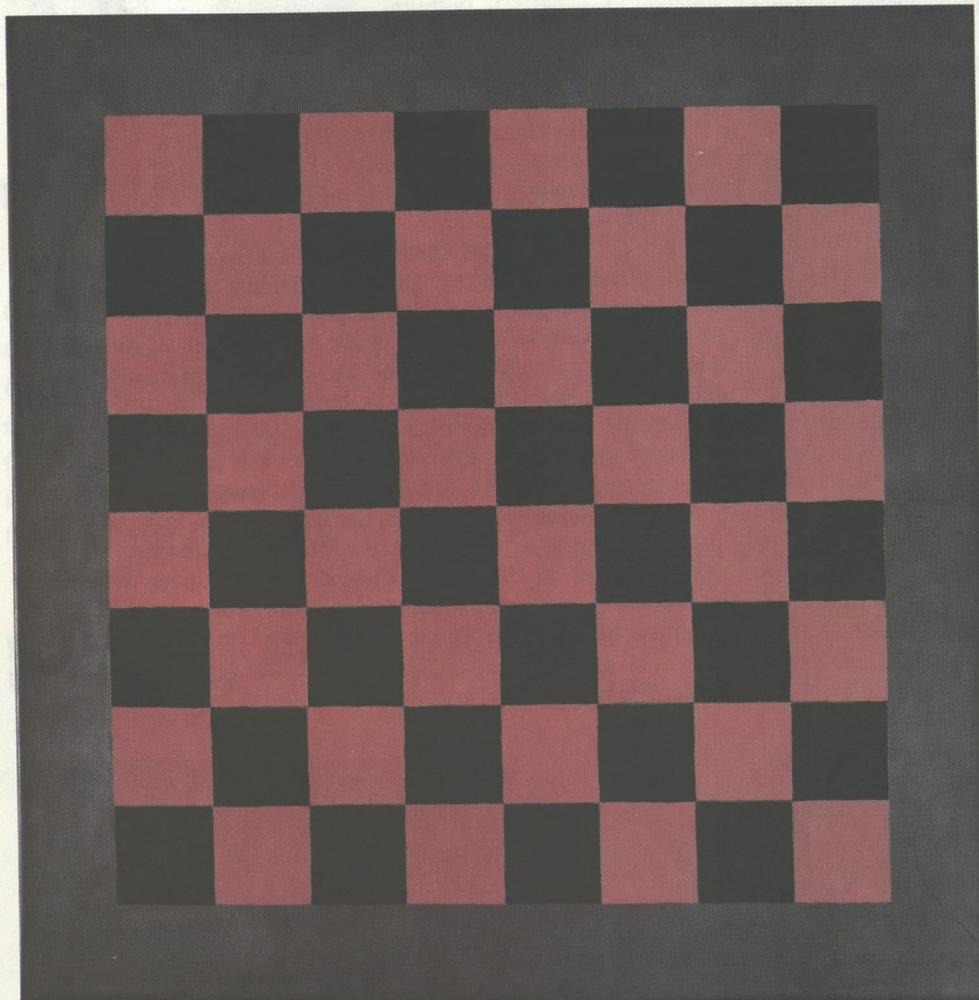
Since 1980, my work has been an exploration of the notion of originality. I continue to think about ambiguity and the improbability of certainty. I still do photographic appropriations. I've just completed some photographs after Rodchenko and a suite of photolithographs after Degas. However, the paintings that I've been making since 1985 are more general in their references. Also, what they appropriate are concerns of other artists rather than a specific image. This confuses the issue of originality even more, which I find amusing.

I enjoy painting because of its physicality. The surface becomes a record of the artist's bodily relationship to the painting. I always want my work to have a physical presence. Even when I make photographs, I want them to be experienced as beautiful, sensuous objects. They are pictures on top of pictures and the gap between the original and my image is the subject matter. For me, they evoke a great sense of loss, especially when the source images are about absence and the passage of time. Unfortunately, the rhetoric that developed around my work didn't make that clear enough. My intention seemed programmatic and bloodless. I regret this misunderstanding and my part in it.

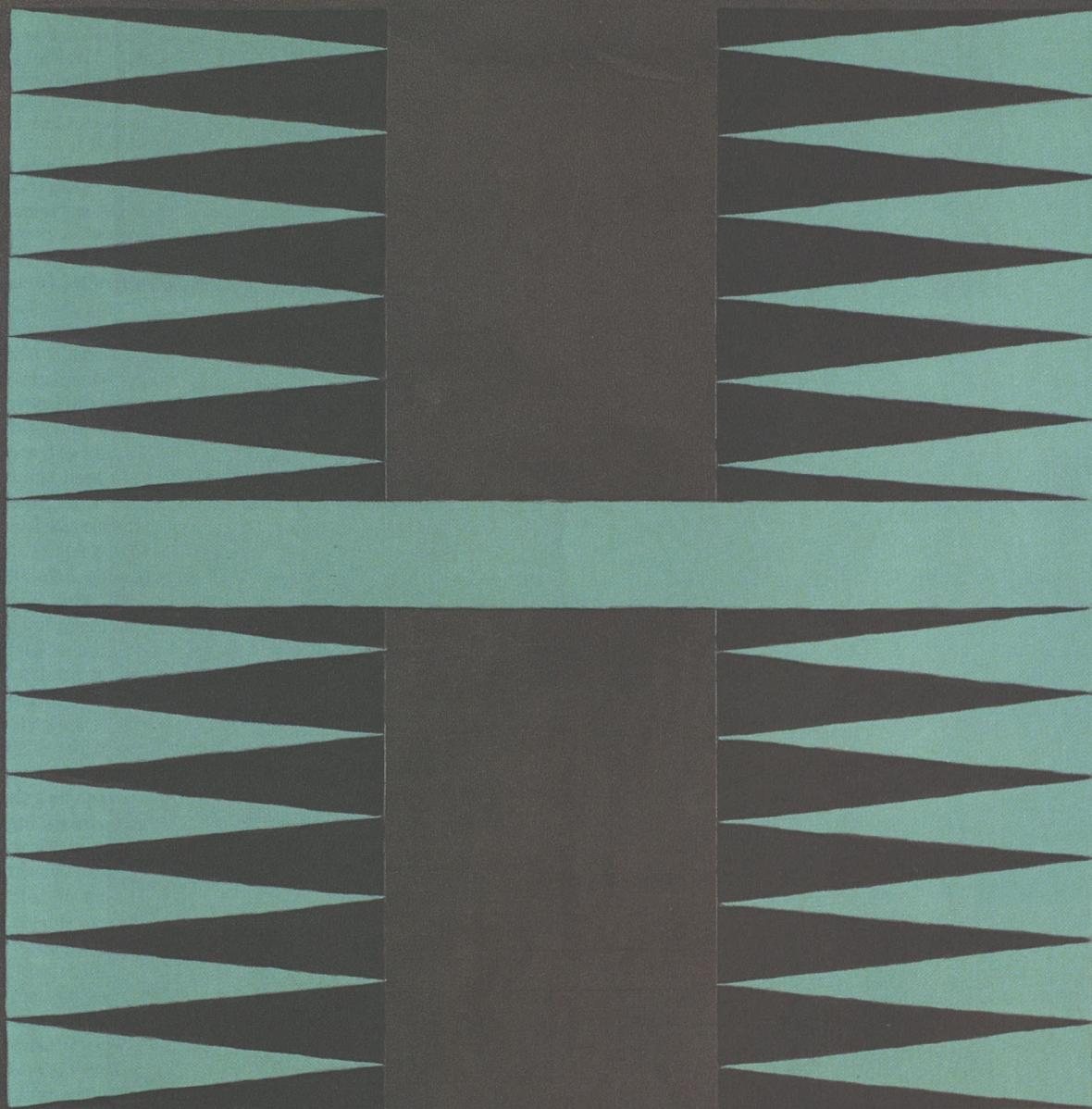
At the moment, a lot of artists are trying to assimilate the lessons of Pop and Minimalism. I find the best of this new work very moving in its attempt to come to terms with a society that is making every effort to alienate us from our truest wishes. Pop and Minimalism were far from passionless exercises; I think much of that work was about having emotions and fighting for them—a concern whose time has come again. A lot of the newest art is also very self-conscious and didactic; this is not just because it is a difficult time to be making art. Young artists tend to be dogmatic as they try to carve out a chunk of art history for themselves. It's a process that necessitates a certain amount of ruthlessness and seems to happen with every generation.

I used to be interested in the notion that art history was progressive; it was something that concerned me a great deal. I was interested in making art history. Now I find that trying to make progressive art doesn't work for me—it always leads to banalities. I can only make the pictures that I want to look at. It's the only way I can arrive at something interesting.

I see my work as antidotal. It's what I do to come to terms with my experience. I think the seduction of painting has something to do with its potential for reconciliation—its false promise of a mediation between the symbolic and the real. I'm always trying to bridge that large gap between the elusiveness of my desires and the bluntness of my physical reality. Often, I see a painting as a stage on which my notions of the past and future compete with the present for my attention. ▽



*Sherrie Levine: Untitled (Lead Checks: 1), 1987, casein on lead, 20 inches square.*



*Untitled (Lead Chevron: 1), 1987, casein  
on lead, 20 inches square. Photos this  
spread courtesy Mary Boone Gallery.*



*Tishan Hsu: Brooding Vinyl, 1987, alkyd acrylic compound and vinyl on wood, 90 by 43 by 3 inches. Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery.*

**"Film and video permeate our everyday lives. Perhaps that's why I make painting and sculpture, which are a bit separate from life. That slight distance allows me to see them more clearly."**

## —Tishan Hsu

*Tishan Hsu was born in Boston in 1951. He received a BSA and an MA from MIT, in 1973 and 1975 respectively. He is currently showing at the Carnegie Mellon University Art Gallery, Pittsburgh [to Dec. 23]. This year he has had solo shows at Leo Castelli and Pat Hearn, as well as at Hillman Holand in Atlanta. He has been in numerous group exhibitions including "The Antique Future" at Massimo Audiello and "Primary Structures" at Rhona Hoffman (Chicago). Hsu lives and works in New York.*

Although I painted before college, I was trained as an architect, not as an artist. The emphasis at the school I attended was how to develop an architecture that allowed for a multiplicity of functions and experiences which were simultaneous. The critical dialogue directly attacked modernist architecture and its basis in theory; instead, it proposed looking at how people actually experienced and used the built environment. During this period, I also worked a lot with film. At some point as I was completing this program, I realized that I was going to be an artist, but this was not something I chose to do; I was very resistant to it at first. For me, art is just a particular mode of operation that I use to deal with the world, to be in it. I've always been more interested in the world at large than in art issues per se; they tend to be somewhat insulated and self-reflexive. My work is not just resolutions of formal or stylistic problems; it comes out of a social context as well. I am not even really aware that I'm following any particular style. I feel, in some ways, that I am an outsider because of how I came to art—which was not from art school and without an extensive background in art history.

I am interested in dualities: a sense of the body and the organic as well as a sense of the object and the technological. In my work, I would like these dualities to interact, producing something that is cool yet expressive, raw but finished, literal and illusionistic, synthetic and organic. My present work, which is the result of eight or nine years of development, is really more of a hypothesis than a statement. At the moment, I believe it is important for me not to think about what painting is or is not. If some of my work does not look quite like painting, it doesn't concern me. If some of my work is considered a little bizarre or strange, it can seem that way to me, too. At this point, I let my work be what it will be. I am much more interested in the experience of making the work, in exploring my daily environment and in asking questions. Living in an industrial society is crucial to my work. I feel very much plugged into a synthetic world, a world determined by media and information in

which realities are constantly switching.

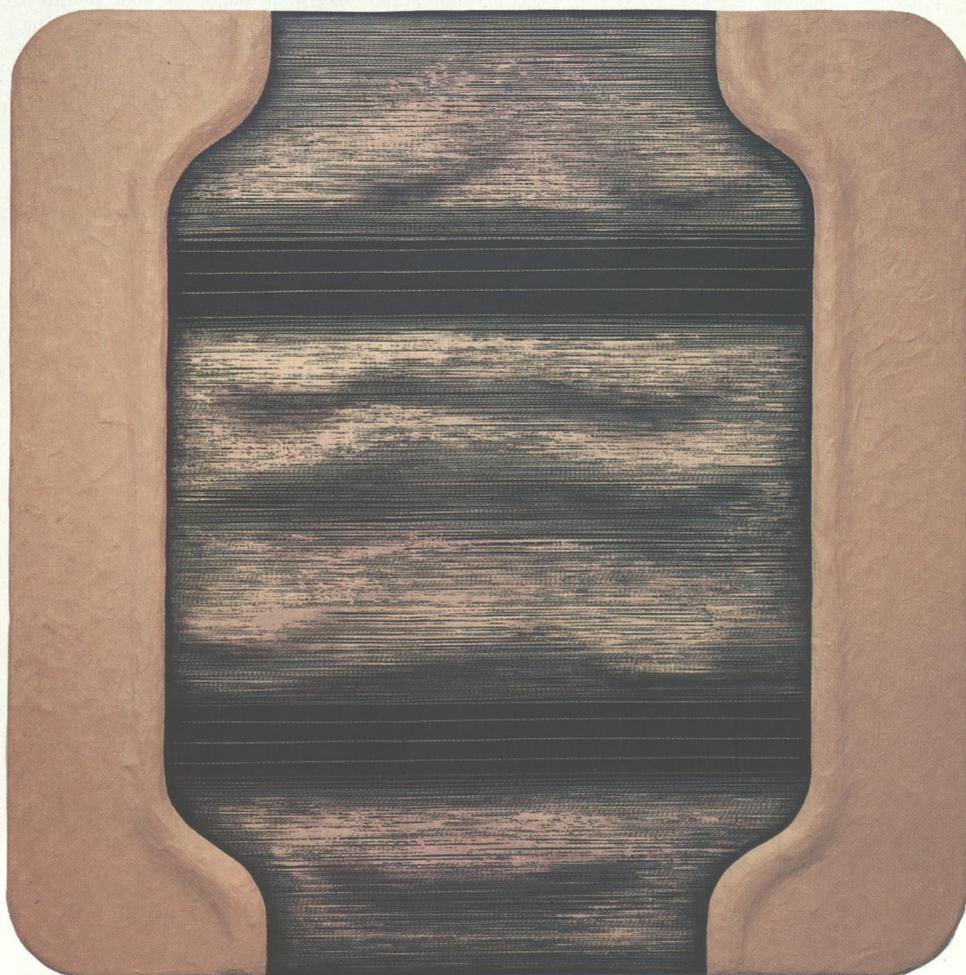
I want my work to come from direct experience. Right now, there is a lot of discussion about how nothing is real—that the world has become totally surreal or hyperreal. I think of an observation Warhol made in his autobiography, *Popism*. He was describing how he felt after he had been shot. Everything, he wrote, seemed unreal, like a movie. None of the people around him seemed real. He didn't even know if he was alive or dead. But one thing was quite real to him: pain. It struck me as ironic that Andy Warhol should experience something real, when he stood for everything that was not. Yet ask someone dying of AIDS what's real and what isn't. I find the context in which we live our lives is often bizarre or absurd: a murder takes place in a white shoebox apartment; a birth takes place under fluorescent lights in a sterilized gray room, or a friend is dying under those same fluorescent lights in a gray cubicle while I drive along at 60 miles an hour in a shaped metal container.

The '80s are very much about splits and contradictions. As old paradigms cease to be sustaining or relevant, different ones will be needed. To me, postmodernism does not seem to be a break with modernism; rather, it seems to be a final

winding down of what began with Manet. Although some of the current dialogue among artists may appear to be negative and nihilistic, it has been a necessary step to undermine and empty out both modernism and the myths surrounding the artist that modernism produced. One of the most important contributions in this regard has come from the feminists and the affirmation of the feminine sensibility. However, it disturbs me that much of art's self-evaluation has been so directly influenced by writers like Walter Benjamin or Jean Baudrillard, to name only two. The result is that much contemporary art seems to be following, not leading. Are artists today afraid to think independently? Certainly art can still create new dialogues and new debates; certainly it can make its own contributions to the world of ideas.

I want my work to have some of the richness, complexity and contradiction which I see in life. When someone looks at my work, I want it to get their attention, the way anything in life would. I am also interested in exploring the simultaneous occurrence of things. I don't refer to past styles in any direct way. Nor do I want to excerpt or demystify them. If anything, I'm interested in

*continued on page 171*



**R.E.M., 1986, alkyd acrylic compound on wood, 60 by 60 by 4 inches. Saatchi Collection.**

**"I prefer art which is sensual. I'm surprised that more artists don't talk about this sensuality or natural eroticism: it's a quality of provocation which requires imagination and experience."**

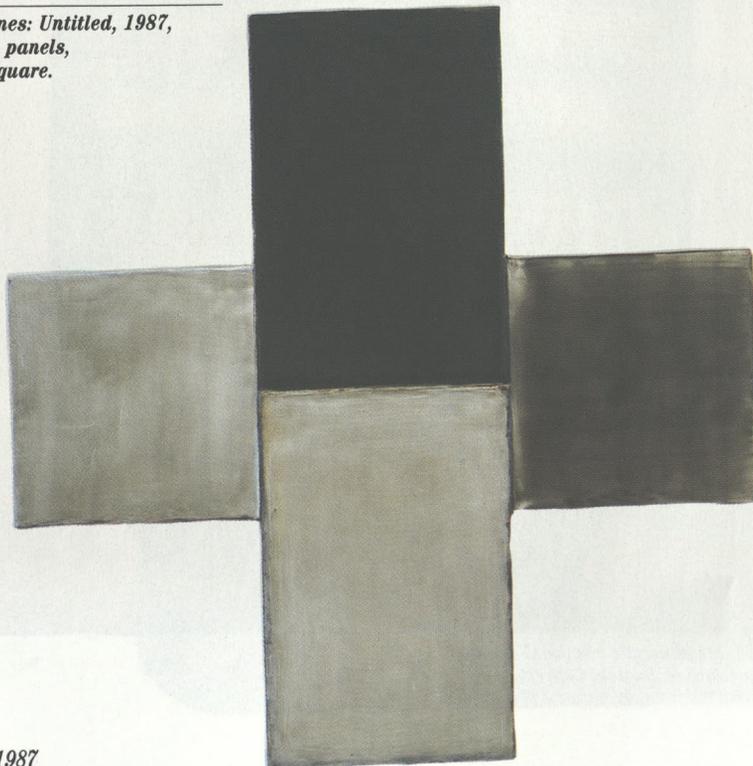
## —Nancy Haynes

*Nancy Haynes was born in Connecticut in 1947. Her most recent solo show was at John Gibson in 1986; there was also an exhibition of her work at the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, in 1985. This year she received grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts and the NEA. An adjunct lecturer at Hunter College, Haynes lives and works in New York.*

I no longer differentiate as strongly between abstraction and figuration. Years ago, my attitude was much more stringent, much more partisan. I can now admire certain contemporary figuration and landscape, certain solutions that are classical, even traditional, although my great passion remains abstraction. For me, abstraction continues to be vital and exciting. As a language, it continues to have integrity.

I spend more time in museums than I do in galleries—in primitive collections like the Rockefeller wing of the Metropolitan Museum or in its Oriental section. I am also very much attracted to prehistoric art, to petroglyphs, bone carvings, cave paintings. I am interested in primitivism as one aspect of modernism's lineage. However, what fascinates me most is the combination of mysticism and physicality, the bond with their environment, manifested by primitive ritual

*Nancy Haynes: Untitled, 1987, oil on wood panels, 24 inches square.*



objects. I'm particularly drawn to Pacific art.

I prefer art which is sensual. I'm surprised that more artists don't talk about this sensuality and natural eroticism. I love to handle materials—different supports like linen and canvas, stone, wood and metal, the pigments, the brushes—but that's not the sensuality I am talking about. Perhaps it's a primal experience which comes from memory, or perhaps it's evoked by reference, but the ability to create this sensuality at all is what makes a painting alive and vibrant. Van Gogh could do it. Often, when I look at a van Gogh, it seems to be really breathing. It's not the surface or the color or the image specifically, but something in it pulsates. Of course, many others come to mind: for example, Gorky, Seurat, Guston, Burchfield. So I don't mean that the painting needs to be a kind of visual fire and brimstone. What I mean by eroticism or sensuality is a quality of provocation which requires imagination and experience, not titillating vignettes.

Through the years, my work has become reductive, even somber and austere; it may seem less giving than more overtly expressive work, but I don't believe in a purely superficial openness. For me, paintings should have intimacy, mysteriousness and sensuality. I hope, at least, that mine would have an edge, something that takes a moment, a second look, a bit of work, to understand. Paintings ought to hold dualities: clarity and ambiguity, futility and meaning, memory and forgetfulness. These put the mind and senses under fire. Deep down, I know no one sees or feels quite what I do when I make this work or when I offer it, but if we can't discover anyone else's true nature, maybe in our art we can discover our own. I think that when a painter really paints from the heart, as romantic as that sounds, the process is no longer entirely in his or her hands; this is not, of course, a new notion.

Light and dark, shifting spaces—the paintings just begin to answer each other and to respond to sensations, all the good and bad things, all the errors one has made. This is not to suggest that art should function as therapeutic absolution.

The beginning and end are hell; I come forward by backing up. At times, they also seem terribly obvious, at least to the person who made them. I'm always shocked at how revealing many paintings are. Sometimes, my own paintings frighten me a little. Even when I have great confidence in my work, it still takes courage for me to show it. On the other hand, I have no doubt about my work philosophically. I struggle with it, and it fights back, but a good painting should be disruptive. I don't mean to take a grand, romantic position, but I can't help that either: strong paintings are disturbing.

I rarely see images per se, just areas—like the green-black in a Memling portrait, or how peculiarly he's treated the skin or the actual paint of the picture. Of course I see the figure in a Cimabue Crucifixion, for example, but often, those paintings of Christ are so sad I can't look at them, so I find places in them that satisfy me in a painterly way. I am drawn less to the literal image than to its abstract, emotional essence. Then, I think of my own paintings. I don't tend to emphasize it, but at times I make direct and tangible references in my own work to that of others, although I change things around: a certain color or colors, a light, a certain space. I lived in Istanbul when I was young and that experience, that time, is in almost all my paintings—influencing the color, the light, the space. I don't associate my cruciform paintings with a religious symbol or icons, however. They are more cruciform than crucifix to me. I am drawn to constructions, especially to those which have hidden places where the absent or non-visible plane is as important as the presence of the visible plane, so that the contradictions support one another. These works are not about architectonics. Nor am I thinking particularly about the Constructivists or the Suprematists when I paint, nor Mondrian, in any conscious way. But there is a moment, as I am painting, when I become, not less conscious, but more awkward. It is this awkwardness which I think is so necessary.

Much of the art today is smart, but it is not particularly deep. I think the irony and the intellectual intention of it a passable joke or strategy, adequate as a conceptual basis, but that's all. For me, art history is as changeable as any other kind of history, and it is useless to imagine, as I work in my studio, what place I occupy in it, although I don't deny that even in the most modest painters there is a desire to extend the visual language. I revere the tradition of painting and am indebted to it. It helps satisfy my need for conventions and ritual.

Painting, for me, is an area of privacy and solace where resistances and contradictions find a place for themselves. It's a process which is something like what the Zen master Rinzai describes in his four propositions: take away the subject, do not take away the object; take away the object, do not take away the subject; take away both subject and object; do not take away either subject or object. ▽



Untitled, 1987,  
oil on slate,  
21 1/2 inches square.

**"My work is not about line and color. If it is abstract, it is because what we call abstraction, with its emptying and systematizing tendencies, is the operative force in the realm of the social."**

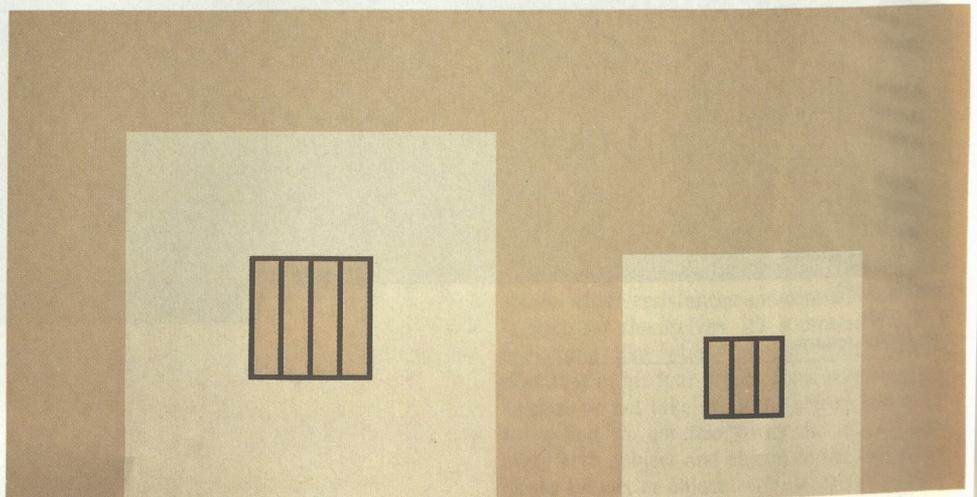
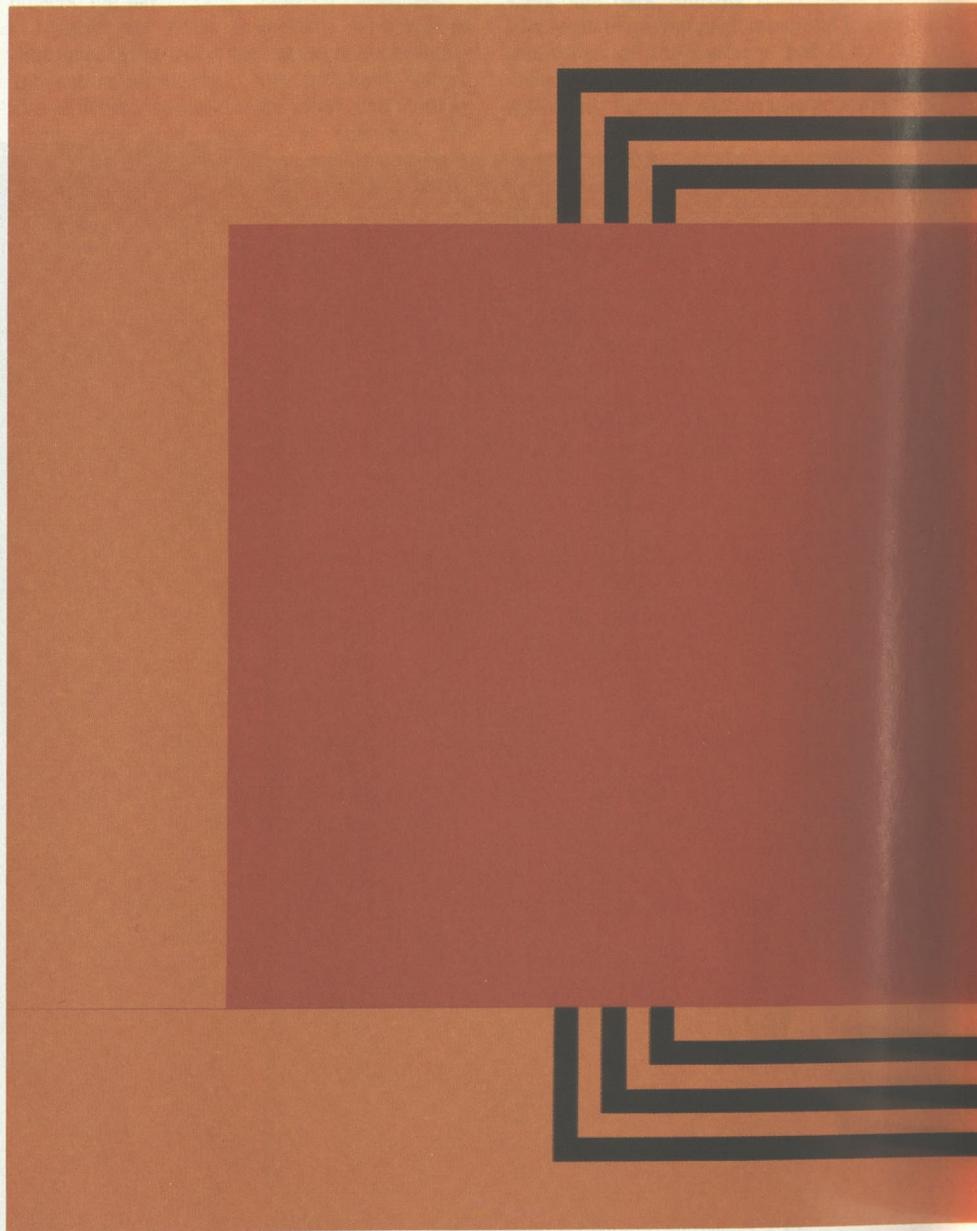
**—Peter Halley**

*Born in New York City in 1953, Peter Halley attended Yale University (BA, 1975) and the University of New Orleans (MFA, 1978). His most recent one-man show was at Sonnabend; he has also shown at International With Monument and with Daniel Templon in Paris. This year his work appeared in the Whitney Biennial, "Avant-Garde in the Eighties" at LACMA and "Post-Abstract-Abstraction" at the Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Conn. Halley has published articles in Arts, Flash Art and other magazines.*

For me, the idea of appropriation is a kind of negation of the idea of influence. Traditionally, an artist would say that he or she was "influenced"; that implied a hierarchical order and historical lineage. Appropriation, however, seems to be about the leveling of those kinds of hierarchies. As such, it functions as a denial or critique of history, which is very useful. However, I'm more interested in the idea of hyperrealization, a term I've taken from Baudrillard, but which I use in a slightly different sense.

Hyperrealization describes a certain kind of relationship that is formed when one artist looks at another artist's work and then makes his or her own work. The interrelationship between the two works is not that of influence, with its implication of a pure historical lineage. Nor is it appropriational; that implies a dead end, a complete passivity. Rather, the second artist hyperrealizes the previous artist's work, just as the socio-political reality of the present hyperrealizes the past. Thus, if the first work represents a reality, the second represents a hyperreality. I use the example of Cézanne and Picasso: Cubism hyperrealized Cézanne, or, similarly, Frank Stella hyperrealized Abstract Expressionism. Hyperrealization emphasizes the idea of disjunction rather than continuity.

The term "New Abstraction" worries me. I don't think of myself as an abstract artist; rather, I describe my paintings as diagrammatic. Also, abstraction is a term which suggests a view of recent events as a mindless pendulum where Neo-Expressionism is inevitably followed by Neo-Abstraction. To me, Neo-Expressionism was the last part of a chain of events that started with Postminimalism. It had to do with the privatization of motivations and feelings in art and the opening up of works of art to a wide range of historical and anthropological sources and to traditional techniques, like oil painting. With Post-minimalist artists like Jackie Windsor and Brice Marden, the cold, systematic, public stance of Minimalism was denied. Art became more nuanced; more about internal feelings, natural



materials; more about metaphor. Anthropological and mythological sources, primitive art, folk art were introduced as well as certain historical references: the Renaissance, Giacometti, early modernism, to name a few. This progressed step by step through artists like Elizabeth Murray all the way to Neo-Expressionism around 1980. But for me, the sensibility on which this kind of work is premised is at odds with the way society today is constituted. In contrast, I want to return to the example of Minimalism or Pop, movements which focused on the contemporary. But going back 20 years to Pop and Minimalism is not the same as going back 60 or 70 years to Expressionism; the socio-economic world formed in the '60s has some continuing relevance to the world of the '80s, but to go back to 1910 is solely a stylistic conceit.

As an artist, I am very much aware of myself as a construct—perhaps even a construct that could have been constituted differently. I've shaped my work in terms of trying to deal with or get at things which I find to be interesting or provocative. I'm not so concerned with whether or not my ideas are true or whether they have a greater claim to truth than someone else's. In an almost situationist way, I want my work to give the viewer (I include myself in this designation) something to think about. This is more important to me than an investment in the truth of the work. I've also come to think that, as an artist, my ego boundaries are perhaps less well-defined than they're supposed to be. For example, whole chunks of someone else's work or thought can float through me into my work, and it doesn't disturb me. Conversely, I'm not quite as territorial as another artist might be if my work is used by someone else; I find it quite pleasurable. Perhaps my cell-and-conduit imagery is relevant to my perception of the artist as a conduit or processor through which different kinds of currents flow.

The first cell-and-conduit paintings were made in 1981. The images and ideas permutate and develop slowly. In general, I'm more attracted to stasis than to change. Before there were any conduits, I was making paintings in which I placed Roll-a-tex prison images on raw canvas. I thought raw canvas was a sign in postwar American art that was very charged. It was a signifier of transcendental expansiveness and of nature. Putting geometric prisons instead of free-flowing color on the raw canvas seemed to me to say something about what had happened to those expanses. I liked the idea of taking combinations of preexisting signs and recasting them to make other meanings. It was the key to how I wanted to express myself.

By using terms like "cell" and "conduit," I want to separate my way of thinking about art from the formalist verities. For me, a line is not just a formal idea. By making it into a conduit, I want to emphasize the social role that geometry plays. Color is also not merely formal. I see it as a coded sign, to be used diagrammatically. Similarly, the square is usually thought of as a formalist icon. I wanted to make the square into a cell, into a figure that has resonance and reality in the

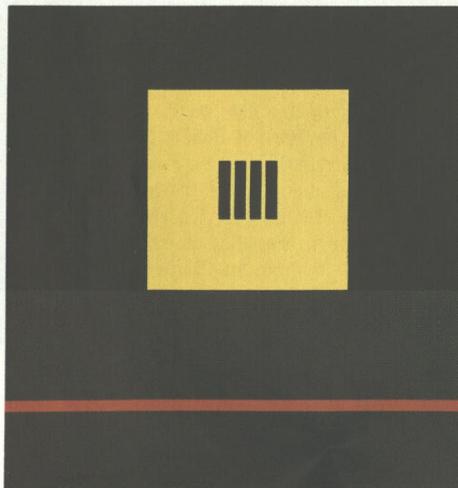
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*Above, Peter Halley: Two Cells with Circulating Conduit, 1987, Day-Glo acrylic, acrylic, Roll-a-tex on canvas, 77 by 138 inches.*

*Opposite, Freudian Painting, 1981, acrylic, Roll-a-tex on unprimed canvas, 72 by 144 inches.*

*Right, Yellow Prison with Underground Conduit, 1985, Day-Glo acrylic, Roll-a-tex on canvas, 64 by 68 inches.*

*Photos this spread courtesy Sonnabend Gallery.*



**"We need profoundly ceremonial and ethical works in our midst right now; we don't need formal paintings. I want to use history to shape my work and historical materiality as its fundamental structure."**

**—Philip Taaffe**

*Philip Taaffe was born in New Jersey in 1955. In 1977, he received a BFA from Cooper Union. This year he had one-man exhibitions at Pat Hearn and, in Boston, at Mario Diacono. He has also shown with Paul Maenz (Cologne) and Ascan Crone (Hamburg). His work was included in this year's Whitney Biennial as well as "Post-Abstract-Abstraction" at the Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Conn. Taaffe lives and works in New York.*

I often think of the issues of modernism in theological terms. Theology extracts an exegesis or makes a story from a number of sacred, inspired or supernatural events. In doing so, these sacred events become amplified, more lucid, more approachable. Perhaps we should see modernism as a field of inquiry in that sense; as a series of sacred and inspired moments, as a theological history to be examined and made lucid.

Modernism consisted of a series of artistic events in conflict which superseded one another. The key attribute of the postmodern condition is the inability to make a new rupture. Now, it is less feasible, perhaps even less desirable, to respond to the situation by attempting to undermine it. Like Alexandria at the time of Christ, this is a syncretic culture. Pluralism is a word which is often used, but I think syncretism more accurately defines the situation; accretions of cultural artifacts brought together in ways that suggest unification rather than dissolution or disjunction. At this moment, there is an effort to heal the artificial rupturings that have occurred over the last hundred years, to take all those violent and inflammatory artistic movements and give them new breath, to allow the consciousness of our moment to reshape them. This is what we have to do: to incorporate as much knowledge and awareness as possible into our work rather than reduce things to narrow, isolated signs.

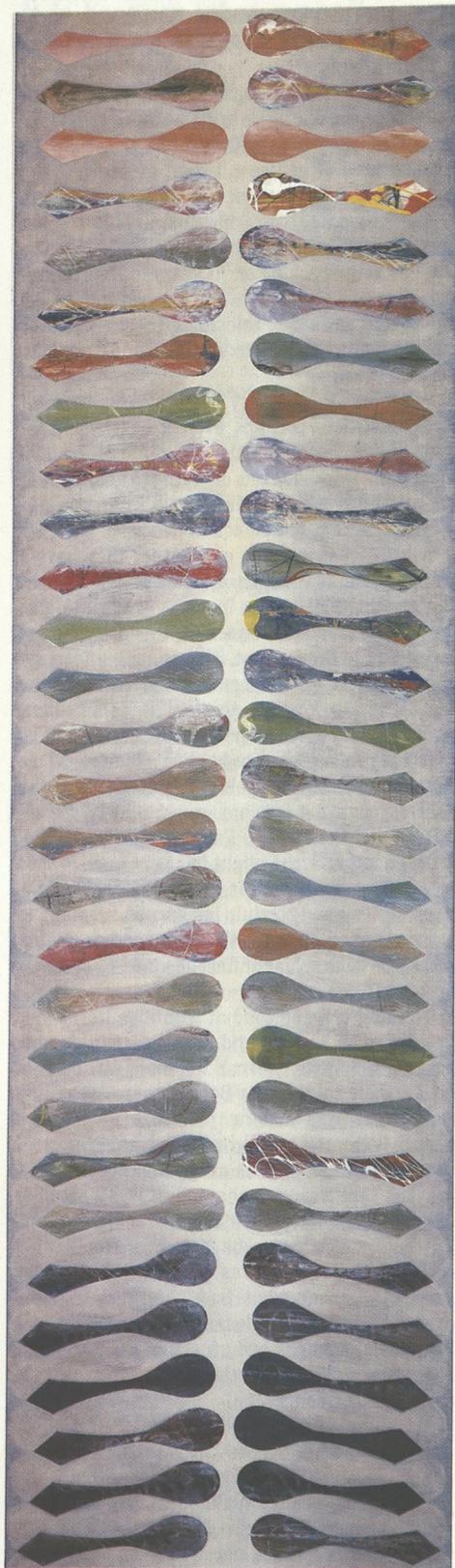
I'm not sure if this new work is at all comparable to, say, the work of Robert Ryman or Brice Marden or Elizabeth Murray. For one thing, the new work is much more ruthless and self-conscious, and for another, there is a great difference in the process by which it comes into being. For example, in much of current painting the subject is predetermined; it is not something which emerges during painting. I work very hard at the planning stage. Once I have the structure, such as this series of dinosaur vertebrae, subsequent decisions are more instrumental than painterly; I don't shape the thing as it goes along. I think Ryman works this same way, and I feel closest to him, but I don't have his concern about

the support. Jake Berthot and Marden are subtle and sophisticated painters, gradually telling a story over layers and layers of paint. I paint layers of paint also, but I begin, as I said before, with an immediate structure and formulation which is complete, which launches the painting. The painting then becomes a way of amplifying or negating that structure, but the structure remains from beginning to end. I compose within a very strict, predetermined framework; I accept that and make the most of it. I think this is also true of Peter Halley and Ashley Bickerton. It may be a nonchalant attitude toward the making of a painting, but the formalist struggle with paint is not an issue for me. I struggle enough with what I do, with the physicality of the painting, the optical effects, etc. For example, I've been doing some linoleum prints that will be cut up for a long optical frieze. I will include other similar blade shapes within this composition, moving them up and down, altering the relationships and so on. I use collage in a musical way, to weave a composition. What I want to make is something very physical and very perceptually demanding, which is why I like this long, horizontal field; it can't quite be taken in. The challenge will be to gauge one's distance from the surface of the painting and to experience it as a composition. This stage—of mapping out and planning—is not the painting, however. The painting comes after: I'll make certain changes, make it tauter, more gripping. But this is the structure.

My work has a formal element to it, but it is not formalist. I care how things relate compositionally, of course, but I am more interested in physical, expressive, compulsive and psychological ingredients beyond formalism, a search for the ruthless thing. I am not interested in making a pretty object. It has to be ruthless. This painting on the left is of dinosaur vertebrae, a big dinosaur bone, but it also has the emphasis of a Color Field painting, a Kenneth Noland or a Barnett Newman. It is obliquely referential; I want to make it into a deeper artifact than either thing itself. That was my intent with the Rileys. I want my paintings to become primeval Riley or, with my Newman images, primeval Color Field painting. This is not just another Color Field painting—it's dinosaur vertebrae as a Color Field painting. Working this way is something I like to do.

I've also concerned myself with the imagery of Ellsworth Kelly, but in the sense that I fuse my sensibility with his so that the result is more of a layering effect than anything else—immediately traceable. I allow it to be traced. His work has sometimes served as the pretext for mine—the starting point—but the image is internalized in a complete way.

Meanwhile, I am really in love with the New York School, with Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman. For me, they were crucial. My involvement with Bridget Riley was a test to see if I could give a Riley the expressiveness that the New York School of painting had. That was the idea—to turn an Op



*Philip Taaffe: Vertebrae, 1987, silkscreen collage, acrylic on canvas, 144 by 41¼ inches.*

*continued on page 171*



*Green, Blue, 1987, silkscreen collage,  
acrylic on canvas, 86½ by 68 inches.  
Photos this spread courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery.*



**Peter Schuyff: Untitled, 1987,  
acrylic on linen,  
75 inches square.**

*There is little art I do not enjoy. If I were asked to pick a favorite picture in a room filled with many, most likely I would choose the brightest. It's really not so important not to like something."*

**—Peter Schuyff**

*Born in Baarn, Holland, in 1958, Peter Schuyff moved to Vancouver in the late '60s and then to New York, where he presently lives and works. This year he had one-man shows at Pat Hearn and Leo Castelli; at Hoffman Borman in Santa Monica; at Paul Maenz, Cologne, and Lucio Amelio, Naples; and at Geneva's Centre d'Art Contemporain. Schuyff's work was recently included in "Post-Abstract-Abstraction" at the Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Conn.*

My pictorial vocabulary has changed some in the past five years, but what remains consistent in my pictures is an exploration of light and the pure pleasure I take in painting them. My paintings look more formal lately, but, for me, grids and checkerboards are quite irreverent compositions. Having been raised on abstract images and technologies represented by grids and geometric patterns, I find them a natural and organic part of my landscape. It's a realm which carries within itself its own antiquity; I cannot possibly see these grids and checkerboards in the same way they were seen originally. In fact, I consider them to be potentially poetic, not as something arid, pristine or theoretical. I think of the early modular sculptures of Sol LeWitt, which have become yellowed and dented. I have never seen them in their new, pristine state and the kind of technology they are a sign for is not a mystery to me, not innovative. Therefore, I cannot help but see them as obsessive and eccentric objects. Maybe this is a misunderstanding, but it is precisely this misunderstanding which has had a great effect on me.

For my generation, abstraction is no longer controversial; it is accepted. I do not see abstraction as a phenomenon separate in any way from the rest of art-making. Everyone knows about abstraction, and abstract pictures are a surprise to no one. I find this a comfortable situation which allows me certain luxuries not afforded the abstract painters of a few decades ago. This is important to me, since doubt would impede my progress. Delight is the impetus for my work; it is essential.

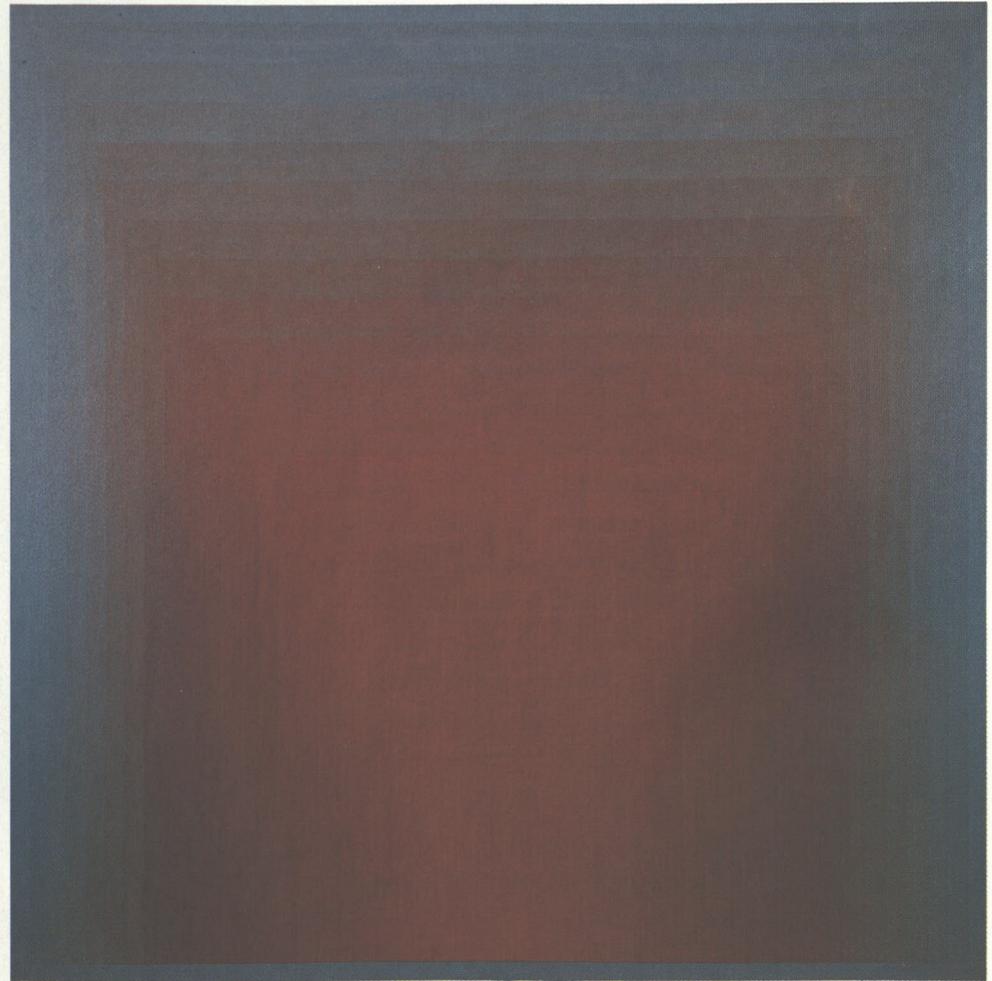
I've never considered an artist's role to be subversive or even eccentric. I think most artists are passionate, which might be mistaken for subversion or eccentricity. The role I choose is to paint for people who look at my paintings. My first responsibility is to them. There is little that is introspective about my work. Rarely do I paint according to my mood or make some kind of private reference. My moods shift more rapidly than my paintings can come into being and my sentiments are private. Yet I'm very passionate

about what I do, and I would hope that the paintings are ultimately poetic. I cannot posit poetics or spirituality as a motivation for them, but after 40 or 50 layers of almost totally transparent paint, an apparition of some kind is inevitable.

The artists who directly influenced me and my own development aside—they belong to a different category—there is little art that I do not enjoy. If I were asked to choose a favorite picture in a room filled with many, most likely I would choose the brightest. It's not so important not to like something. Recently, I've been thinking about the space and light group from California. I think the beauty of their work has been, at times, forgotten. But I view the issues of abstraction indifferently; to me, the light and spirituality in it have always been very clear. As to whether or not I'm a "New Abstractionist": I'm young, and I do make abstract pictures; therefore, I suppose

I am. I don't have a problem with labels or terms. Often, they are useful generalizations. Occasionally, I have been inappropriately grouped, but that has always been fun and rarely important.

I think that this period of time is characterized by a certain moral indifference. One of the things I talk about in terms of my work is my lack of liberal guilt. The shedding of this liberal guilt is perhaps misconstrued as a cynical act, but I don't think that's what it is. Instead, I think of it as a kind of irreverence, a luxury. What I want to avoid is the pious. I went to art school in Canada, but all I remember of those times was following around Michael Morris, a great painter of the '60s. Michael thought of painting as mischievous, as something inherently naughty. I think about this often. I do take an almost sinful delight in painting, and I like to think that I make the occasional naughty reference and mischievous composition. ▷



*Untitled, 1987, acrylic on linen,  
75 inches square. Photos this  
spread courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery.*

**"I've never been interested in geometry as a pure form of abstraction. Instead I think of it as a language to combine with other painting languages in order to empty my work of some built-in preconceptions."**

## —Moira Dryer

*Born in Toronto in 1957, Moira Dryer moved to New York City in 1976. She subsequently attended the school of Visual Arts (BFA, 1980). This fall she showed at the Hoffman Borman gallery, Santa Monica, and at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (in the "Currents" series). She is represented by John Good and last showed there in 1986. Her work has appeared in a number of recent group shows including "Grand Designs" at Bard College's Proctor Art Center. Dryer lives and works in New York.*

After I got out of art school, I worked in the theater. And although I ended up by returning to painting and sculpture, my work is still informed by what I did for Mabou Mines and other performance groups. I've just finished a large body of new paintings—as theatrical as ever, but different from my earlier work in other ways. They're a lot less involved with geometry, and they're looser, more painterly.

Even before, geometry was never the central

issue in my work. I have utilized the tradition of reductive geometric painting, but I've never been interested in it as a pure form of abstraction. Instead, I thought of it as a language to combine with other painting languages in order to empty my work of some of the associations built into the whole enterprise. For instance, I wanted to suggest portraiture, landscape and still-life painting, but I used geometry as a framework to do it, so that one set of preconceptions would erase another. That way I was able to use minimal means to convey, I hope, real feeling.

All this was partly a reaction to Neo-Expressionism, which I felt lacked true emotional content. Bravado and big gesture don't necessarily mean you're feeling anything with any intensity. Neo-Expressionism claimed that it dealt with life-and-death issues, but I didn't feel that it really lived up to any of that. Maybe some of the earlier work had a dramatic intensity, but what came later felt false.

Anyway, it was in looking for new ways to bring emotional life to my work that I arrived at simple, geometric paintings that, to me, were not pure reductive abstractions. I thought of them as very emotionally specific. Of course the work can be analyzed formally, but that level of discussion doesn't interest me. I think my work is different from earlier abstraction, but without being based in any attitude of skepticism toward it.

Maybe that's why I don't feel a kinship with what's being called the new abstract painting; it seems to be completely absorbed in a dialogue with art history in and of itself. For example, the "new" Minimalism just refers back to its prece-

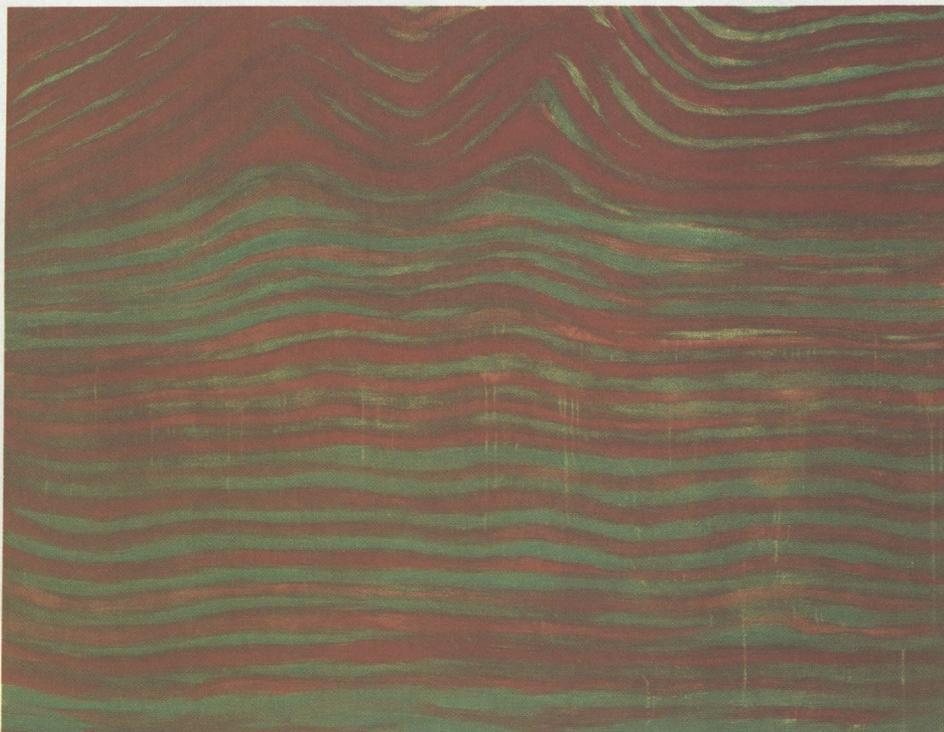
dent; it doesn't propose anything new. Also, a lot of the new work is based on closed systems and illustrations of personal theories, or it's trying to have a sociological impact. That's very limiting. As a result, I do feel somewhat isolated in what I'm doing; my work is more open-ended, more directly involved with life. I am influenced by my visual environment and time: 1987, America, New York City, Times Square.

For me, the work always comes first; it is always a few steps ahead of me and surprises me. I dislike painters who put their theories before their paintings—that becomes a didactic exercise. Paintings have a life of their own, beyond theories. The artist's discourse may be important, but it is only a part of the work, and tends to become a strategic ploy. There are exceptions, obviously; many artists I admire have a distinct critical edge: Philip Taaffe, Ross Bleckner and Elizabeth Murray, among others.

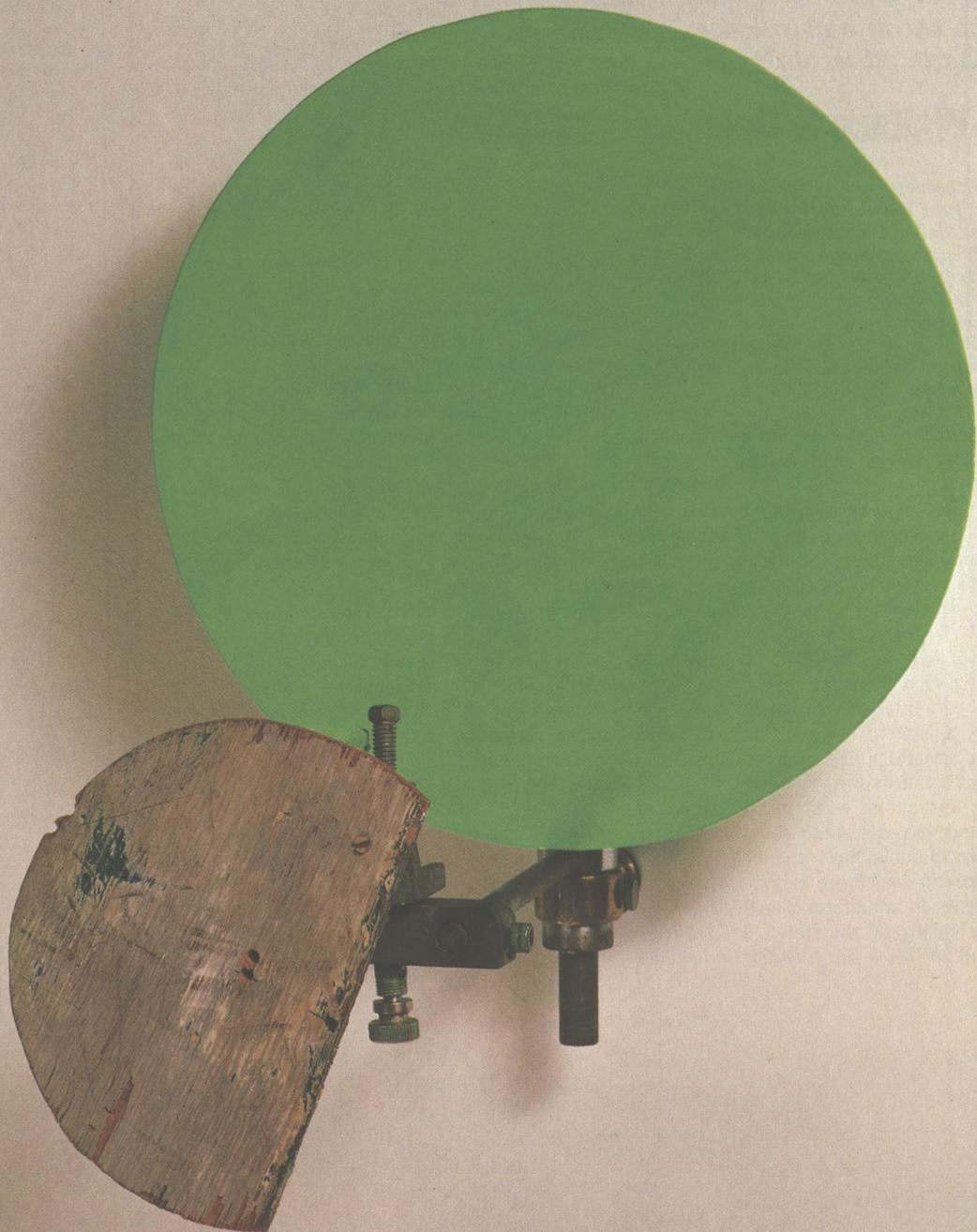
There was a point a few years ago when people started to hate paint again; it was supposed to be an antiquated language. But the argument was ridiculous. Actually, that was just when things began to loosen up: you could finally make abstract paintings which weren't all angst, paintings full of different kinds of information. For example, you could now have a conceptual background and also be involved with expressionist issues. That was—and is—new territory. It can mean, for example, big abstract paintings that are not egocentric, or fully achieved paintings that refer to other work. It can mean parodies, or expressive recombinations of established vocabularies. I think this is exciting. For example, a few years ago I started to make target paintings and stripe paintings, but I wasn't addressing the same issues as the original users of those elements. Instead, it was like having a dictionary in front of me: I could refer to these established languages for my own ends, be they critical or emotional.

I don't see my paintings and sculpture as abstract. I see them as things or pictures of things; pictures of pictures; even, in a sense, portraits. To me, they are representational, involving a pictorial space that refers, if anything, to the Siene paintings of the 14th century. I am interested in older paintings and have always used them in my work. In a good painting by Velazquez and in a good painting by Barnett Newman, there is a powerful and tangible life which is similar. I am not so interested in the imagery as I am in the mood—the emotional presence—and that is what I try to appropriate.

People are open again to the evocative qualities of painting. Of course, painting no longer serves the same function as it did when it was the main way of creating images of the world, but maybe that's part of what's so exciting: the old restrictions are off. It used to be that to look at a painting was automatically to assign it to a particular school of art or a particular tradition, but now painting is involved with such a range of issues that stylistic typing is not only irrelevant but contradictory. Painting has become more intelligent than that; it feels stronger; it's more versatile. ▶



*Moira Dryer: Untitled, 1987, casein on wood, 48 by 63 by 3 inches.*



*Short Story, 1987,  
casein, metal, wood,  
16 by 11½ by 9 ¾ inches.*

"We met at the Hartford Art School—"

"No, we popped out of a Frank Stella painting in '59."

"I think our whole enterprise has been one of ambivalence, extending to all we do."

## —Wallace & Donohue

*Wallace & Donohue (Joan Wallace and GERALYN Donohue) were born in New York City in 1959, and attended the Hartford Art School, Hartford, Conn. (1977-81). They showed most recently at Tony Shafrazi; Postmasters will be putting on an exhibition of their work in February '88. They also appeared in "Perverted by Language" at the Hillwood Art Gallery in Greenvale, N.Y., this year. Wallace & Donohue have published in Art & Text, C Magazine and other art/literary journals.*

**Geralyn Donohue:** As far as our work itself is concerned, we provide built-in stage directions for the viewer.

**Joan Wallace:** The relationship between our titles and the paintings is also something we think about. Sometimes it's literal; sometimes literary: it's very much based on impressions—what strikes the viewer as he or she looks at the painting. We've been thinking about what the resonance of that relationship is as opposed to rationalizing what the paintings are about.

**GD:** We're very interested in the associational.

**JW:** Our approach evokes the frustration involved in something like trying to activate an intransigent set of knowns.

**GD:** We're all familiar with the conventions of painting, and we recognize those conventions as our given set of limits. But with our work, absurdity surfaces in something like the activity of staging events on a platform of nothingness.

**JW:** I'm thinking of the title, *The Obdurate Fortitude With Which Our Slender Innuendoes*

*Become Fatuous.* It confesses the mode in which an object seems to usurp itself in terms of its own materiality or its own lack of dialectical resilience (or the viewer's lack, for that matter). It's just one more facet of our frustration in front of the problem of making thought processes visible.

**GD:** What a quaint idea. [Laughter]

**JW:** If we consider the notion that language exists in an autonomous and circuitous entropic state, seemingly impervious to even our best intentions [laughter]—let's just say that's the extreme state of things, held up as a model for thinking about work—and what we've tried to do is to put a strain on the concept of "no referent."

**GD:** When we first started, we were thinking about authorship. Working with two people starts to dissolve the author. [Laughter]

**JW:** Or further problematize him, driving a wedge into the whole mythmaking process and helping to secure what we're doing as more investigatory than an ego process. However, we found out during the course of our collaboration that you definitely don't lose your ego. Maybe you find it all the more... Shall we discuss what we're doing for the next show?

**GD:** Well, Joan, we'll be doing separate work which we'll hang side by side, still within the W&D framework.

**JW:** It will be a curious process, since I don't know what GERALYN is up to and she doesn't know what I'm up to; we won't know what kind of visual dialogue might appear until the show comes together, although we will be using the same vernacular. I think we're kind of courageous in doing this.

**GD:** Maybe it's the beginning of the...

**JW:** End.

**GD:** We met at the Hartford Art School—

**JW:** No, we popped out of a Frank Stella painting in '59.

**GD:** I think our whole enterprise has been one of ambivalence. It extends into everything we do.

*continued on page 171*

*Opposite, Wallace & Donohue: Ignore the Man in the Booth, 1986, latex on canvas, galvanized steel, each panel 72 by 60 by 21 inches.*

*Bottom, Jack in the Box (Five Easy Pieces), 1987, wood, oil paint, photograph, 72 by 60 by 17 inches. Photos this spread courtesy Postmasters Gallery.*

