

Original Sins: Sculpture as Painting, Painting as Multi-Dimensional Space

Fred Gutzeit and Peter Reginato are both unstoppably energetic art makers, both have decades of prolific accomplishment to their credit, and both are richly generative of bodies of new work organically derived from their previous series and compositions. The mark-making and definition of space in both artists' work shapes visual experience so as to address the nature of perception itself. Yet it's surprisingly hard to define which of the two is now making sculpture, and which paintings.

Tradition recounts that original sin was a quest for forbidden experience, for the sensual pleasure of a prohibited taste. It led to both knowledge and punishment, perception and shame. If eating the apple of knowledge in Eden somehow led to artistic expression as well as human consciousness in general, then assuredly artists are descendents of Eve's. Reginato and Gutzeit have named their exhibition in mindfulness of this, and also awareness of their own breaking of taboos.

But is it really so transgressive for metal sculpture to be colored and painterly, for paintings to be black and white and derived from computer generated renderings of mathematical objects? Or for painting to leap off the walls into the round, and for sculptural volume and mass to haunt thoroughly planar paintings? It's easy to see how pleasure, experience and knowledge are everywhere alive and active in these artists' work, but there's certainly no hint of shame and exile involved here at all. Seeing their work together is more like walking into a raucously jubilant celebration than witnessing the fallout from the expulsion from the Garden of Eden: the triumph of art rather than the fall of man. The more immediate source for this show's title was a work of Reginato's: reading Eva Hesse's remark that 'the decorative is the only art sin', he responded with a sculpture cheekily titled Original Sin (for Eva Hesse). Gutzeit's paintings, by contrast, incline less toward the decorative per se, but also turn their backs on the stridency and stringency of much Minimalism and Post-Minimalism.

The bulging, whirling, flashing forms of Gutzeit's often monochromatic paintings jump and pulse with a far greater velocity than the familiar push-pull motions of Cézanne or Cubism. They create a mesh in which to catch both the bulging materiality of the three dimensional world, and the recondite time-space conjunctions of abstract physics. Here, painting works with great energy to transcend its essential two dimensionality through optical effect. Reginato's sculptures, on the other hand, might just as well be termed drawings in three dimensional space, or even—in a few cases—paintings of unusual mass and volume. He speaks of “trying to make a three dimensional painting in the round,” and the solid masses of his sculptures are built up from the pigmented gel usually found in far thinner layers on canvases. The putty-like gel brings volume to armatures of metal rods, and its delicate chromatic effects and surfaces certainly suggest paintings which have leapt into three dimensions rather than sculpture per se. The exuberance of the resulting works is guileless and high powered.

Reginato established a comfortable vocabulary of colorful organic and geometric forms already by the early 1970s; while his work has taken many different turns, he remains true to his roots in terms of sculptural construction. Nowadays it's now no longer obligatory for painting to live on the walls, so his sculpture can be understood as a kind of extreme reification of drawing. Reginato's work is frequently compared to that of artists as various as Elizabeth Murray, Frank Stella and Nancy Graves, but as he points out, the elements of his works are neither representations nor found objects, nor assemblages. He fabricates all own works, cutting, welding, applying gel with baking tools and palette knives in a painterly additive process. The harmonies of color are paradoxically most audible in a tall, largely white sculpture, Little Mo in White, which looks not unlike a skeleton. Its bony plates like a pelvis or a stegosaurus's armor are delicately adorned with patches and intimations of pearlescent color, whereas many of the other pieces are abundantly, even hectically polychromatic. To look at their form is to see the history of its improvisational making.

Gutzeit, by contrast, generates paintings from a variety of source materials ranging from the topography of nature as mediated through his own earlier drawings, (highly representational landscape studies), and from mathematical objects such as Calabi-Yau manifolds. The earlier work qualifies him to be considered the last Hudson River School painter, lovingly delineating the Catskill landscape a century after Frederick Church, Albert Bierstadt, and the others. Yet those meticulously rendered sense impressions of the landscape are now transformed into highly abstract codings which seem to bulge and pulse with sculptural energies that far exceed the conventions of pictorial representation of space. They sit side by side with others which have their sources in physics and mathematics. There is an utterly logical refinement of vision in these bold abstractions; superficialities of representation fall away to reveal the raw, basic operation of the artist's hand-eye-mind. As he puts it, he wants "to play the shapes as a musical composition".

Calligraphic and vibrational, Gutzeit's landscape forms morph into abstraction just as his mathematical diagrams emerge from it to suggest cosmic origins. The extraordinarily dynamic Craetion of Life demonstrates that it scarcely matters whether the intricate evolution of forms on the canvas originate in his own images or those derived from math and physics. In each case, form is born of spatial distortion, and art addresses the transformations of form in the world at large. Gutzeit's reading of physicist Stephen Hawking on the beginning of the universe in the stoppage of time at the center of a black hole has inspired paintings that attempt to move beyond conventional pictorial space to the dimension of time, paintings that flicker slightly bewilderingly between micro and macro visions of the world.

Making studio visits to Peter Reginato and Fred Gutzeit is a study in contrast. Reginato moves fast, and talks fast, in an unbroken flow of narrative, telling stories about his own process, describing the constant emergence of new forms in his work from the foundations of what went before. He travels back and forth unselfconsciously in circles across his

studio from one piece to another, he touches things, takes them apart, demonstrates how he employs each technique, gestures with tools, mentions many other artists. The sheer, raw generative will to create is everywhere apparent, as is the fluid evolution of his artistic process, with one piece leading to the next in an unbroken chain in which descriptive categories of any kind don't matter. By contrast, Gutzeit talks with concentration in a steady flow of often highly abstract ideas. He pauses to think before continuing, and doesn't speak much as he deliberately shifts stacks of paintings aside to reveal more work. He describes his previous work only when needed to illuminate his present working method. He mentions many critics, philosophers and scientists, and emphasizes new departures in his evolving vision at several points in his career to date. Yet both men are plainly immersed in their work, eager to execute the next work in their series, and they talk with longing of what they plan to do to the unfinished works awaiting them in their studios. Maybe Le Corbusier had it wrong, and creation isn't such a patient search; instead, it's as if one bite of the apple from the tree of knowledge set in motion the artistic equivalent of a nuclear reactor, a continuing controlled explosion.

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