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Barbara Rose on George McNeil

8-10 minutes

[George McNeil](#) manages to avoid falling into either of the two major pitfalls that plagued late Abstract Expressionism: poor color and the lack of coherent structure. His color—predominantly the complementary hues of red and green, orange and blue, is adroitly set off by touches of black and white. Because his palette is so conventional, the paintings don't mean much as a color experience, but the brilliance of the hues does manage to keep the paint lively and healthy looking and to compensate for the deadness that naturally issues from overpainting. The best pictures—*Cassandra* and *Clarabel*—tend to treat the figure (the motif on which the work is based) as a legible shape with closed contours. This prevents the confusion that results in less successful works such as *High Society*, when open contours allow background and figure to flow into one another in a manner which undermines the coherence of the composition. The strongest picture in the show is *Cassandra*. I suspect the reason is because it makes the clearest statement about the relationship of the figure to the ground surrounding it. In order to do this, McNeil is forced to resort to the simplistic device of separating figure from ground by means of a roughly drawn thick white outline which surrounds the figure, effectively defining its relationship to the space around it, albeit in a manner that is by now an academic convention. Zones of color such as the banded left leg are used with advantage to set up a measured horizontal stress that is effectively played off against the curvilinear pulsations of the contour.

The work in general is large, bold and energetic. Painted with the control and sophistication one expects from this veteran Abstract Expressionist, whose career as a modernist is one of the longest in the New York School, the works are technically very accomplished, but never slick. Apart from the question of the relative quality of individual pictures, McNeil's show raises a number of issues central to any current critical discussion. McNeil sums up the problems quite

succinctly: “Is it possible to develop images in terms of abstract forms and colors?” he asks. “Is it possible to continue in the grand tradition of modern art whereby painting *per se*, acid greens, metallic oranges and molten reds moving in assonance, can furnish an artistic patent of legitimacy? Above all, is it possible to extend and exploit sensation both in the gamut of pictorial energies and in the consequent, associational figures? Can one impact these greens, oranges and reds, can they be brutalized and havocked, all to heighten plastic excitement as the means to psychological expressiveness?”

My answer to all these questions would be no. McNeil is attempting to work in the figurative tradition. He has had the good sense to use the conventions of a pre-Cubist style, since the accommodation of the figure to the shallow depth of Cubism meant the death blow to that tradition. Because of this, McNeil’s style is not a dishonest compromise, like Diebenkorn’s. Diebenkorn, ironically, has been most successful at organizing abstract forms and colors into recognizable configurations; but this victory has been won at the cost of compromise with both the figurative and the abstract traditions.

The original impulse to stylize figures into patterns was decorative; in the modern period it begins in Post-Impressionism and ends in the late Matisse. This use of the figure, however, depends on reducing the figure to a convention, a symbol for the human form rather than a depiction of it. Conversely, the Expressionist distortion of the human figure does not treat the figure purely as flat pattern. It attempts to preserve, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the painter, that aspect of the figure which most distinguishes it from abstract pattern: its three-dimensionality. Diebenkorn’s art is deeply compromised because it attempts to use the figure in both of these antithetical ways—as an abstract arrangement of form and color and as actual form in illusionistic space. The result is that the figure is unconvincing as a figure, because it is not sufficiently modeled or given adequate space in which to move around. It functions merely as a scaffolding on which to hang an arrangement of form and color that is conceived from the beginning as an abstraction. Thus the use of the figure in work like Diebenkorn’s is after the fact: the figure is not the point of departure but an artificial vehicle used to make abstraction palatable.

Fortunately McNeil does not, like Diebenkorn, attempt the perverse end of reconciling a basically Cubist spatial organization with sharp light and dark modeling, a relic of pre-Cubist representational art. McNeil’s return to the figure

did not mean a return to light and dark modeling; like his teacher [Hans Hofmann](#), McNeil suppresses value contrasts in favor of contrasts of hue. His painting indeed looks backward, but not to Cubism. Rather it looks back to pre-Cubist Fauvism, specifically as it was interpreted by the German Expressionists. In fact, the first impression one has on seeing McNeil's brilliant, impastoed surfaces and bug-eyed disjointed figures is not that one is in New York in the fifties, but, on the contrary, that one is in Munich in the teens and twenties. Not much other than the scale, which is that of the New York School, separates McNeil's recent work from that of the German Expressionists. And within that context, it is very good work, more surely constructed and technically refined than that of the majority of European Expressionists. It is for example, head and shoulders above that, of an artist like Appel. But when viewed within its actual context of the painting of today, it is irrelevant to any of the issues animating current work.

The question that must be posed is how this affects our judgment of the quality of the work. Are critical judgments historically conditioned? Is Picasso's recent work bad because it is retarded or is it retarded because it is bad? Despite the intelligence, skill and feeling of McNeil's recent paintings, they lack the particular force, the authority, the sense of revelation we gain from the innovational. It remains for criticism to clarify the precise relationship between quality and radicality. That they are identical is one of the most basic assumptions of current art writing, yet no attempt has been made to explicate this relationship. ([Michael Fried](#) is the only critic to my knowledge to have made a stab at it. In *Three American Painters* he defines the central task of modernism as a self-renewal through radical self-criticism, a conclusion that, if accepted, would presume the identification of quality with radicality.)

Unfortunately, the artist McNeil asks to be compared with is Hofmann, a consummate master with whom few if any painters working today can bear comparison. Appropriating Hofmann's acidulous Fauvist-Expressionist palette, he lacks Hofmann's understanding of its potential for variety. He is, moreover, unwilling or unable to follow Hofmann's methodical investigation of Cubism which led to the inevitable renunciation of the figurative as inimical to the abstract.

The Cubist answer to the figure was at first to stylize it into patterned symbol; but the gradual further abstraction of symbol into geometric shape, as the space of late Cubism became more condensed, meant its demise as far as Cubist-derived art was concerned. In this sense Cubism distorted the figure as much if not more

than Expressionism; but Expressionism did so toward the end of extracting a heightened emotional response, whereas Cubism meant to accommodate the figure to a two-dimensional surface. Now no human being can look at a deformed human figure without being upset. He is forced to project himself into the figure; any discrepancy between the deformed figure and the norm is bound to be disturbing. Whether or not one believes that this is an esthetic response, however, determines one's stand *vis-à-vis* the various forms of Expressionism. Surely the mere distortion of the human figure does not provide a very intense reaction (*viz.*, the paltry content of the "monster" school and the various returns to the figure we have recently witnessed).

Happily, there is more to McNeil's art than mere distortion of the figure. On the other hand the work not only breaks no new ground but retreats to ground broken nearly half a century ago. This in itself would not be enough to condemn it; but the work seems just more evidence to support the conclusion that only the radical and the innovational can have the highest quality, at least in the modern period.

—[Barbara Rose](#)



John Graham, *Celia*, oil on board.



Kenneth Hayes Miller, *The Shopper*.



middle-class *Shopper* with Graham's elegant, aristocratic *Celia* gives one all too clear an idea of its decline into the democratic, illustrational art that was the legacy of Henri. The Hartley, the O'Keeffe and the magnificent Patrick Henry Bruce provide some indication of the high points of early American modernism, while the Pollock, small Gottlieb and Rothko, and the eccentric inch-and-one-half wide Newman, *The Wild*, are inadequate to illustrate the triumph of modernism in the work of the New York School.

The general feeling one gets from this exhibition, as from virtually every exhibition of American art yet assembled, is of its pervasive vulgarity, a vulgarity mitigated only by its concomitant vitality. Has any national art in the world—with the possible exception of the Russians, who romanticize pop culture as much as we do—ever produced anything as garish

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George McNeil, *Secret*, 78 x 72", 1965.
Howard Wise Gallery.

as Bellows's *The Beach* with its Sunday-supplement color, or as vulgar a caricature as Benton's *July Hay*? This is the question some, who consider 20th-century American art as a whole a failed enterprise, are still asking. It's a question, unfortunately, that has every right to be asked.

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Diebenkorn, attempt the perverse end of reconciling a basically Cubist spatial organization with sharp light and dark modeling, a relic of pre-Cubist representational art. McNeil's return to the figure did not mean a return to light and dark modeling; like his teacher Hans Hofmann, McNeil suppresses value contrasts in favor of contrasts of hue. His painting indeed looks backward, but not to Cubism. Rather it looks back to pre-Cubist Fauvism, specifically as it was interpreted by the German Expressionists. In fact, the first impression one has on seeing McNeil's brilliant, impastoed surfaces and bug-eyed disjointed figures is not that one is in New York in the fifties, but, on the contrary, that one is in Munich in the teens and twenties. Not much other than the scale, which is that of the New York School, separates McNeil's recent work from that of the German Expressionists. And within that context, it is very good work, more surely constructed and technically refined than that of the majority of European Expressionists. It is for example, head and shoulders above that of an artist like Appel. But when viewed within its actual context of the painting of today, it is irrelevant to any of the issues animating current work.

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To cross the street from the Wise Gallery to the Bykert is to experience a disorienting cultural shock. McNeil's violent images and strident palette couldn't be farther from the muted withdrawal of the younger generation displaying their works in a GROUP SHOW at the Bykert. Seeing the works juxtaposed is to see illustrated two diametrically opposed world views.

There is no question that the paintings by Brice Marden, David Novros, Paul Mogensen, Ralph Humphrey and

Peter Gourfain at the Bykert aspire to be radical art. All are more or less "minimal" in that they are monochromatic or close to it. The ambition ranges from Marden's modest small-scale panels to Gourfain's expansive 18-foot plum color field painting and Novros's angular shaped canvas constructions, which use the wall as negative space in their gestalt interplay. Common to all the work, however, is a curious listlessness and homogeneity that often accompanies derivative work. For not one idea in the show is original. Marden's dense rectangles with their dripped lower margins look like the backgrounds of Johns's large paintings; Mogensen's and Novros's modular art fill the gap between Stella and Judd. Only Ralph Humphrey's tense, sensitive abstraction of three narrow, parallel bands on a pale grey field is sufficiently distinctive to be remembered.

A show like this only goes to prove that the reductive solution is a narrow one which leaves little play for the imagination or room for variety. Only master craftsmen like Larry Bell or Robert Irwin seem able to create a reductive art of any complexity or considerable esthetic impact. For the rest, there appears no exception to the rule that for a few people less is more, but for the vast uninspired majority, less is just simply less. The exhibition at the Bykert is a depressing reminder of the poverty of the current scene. It is quite representative of the work being turned out by young artists, work whose major virtue is competence and whose range of ambition is entirely within the possible.

Obviously, the younger generation sees the present cultural situation as calling for an art of introspective contemplation rather than one of empathetic catharsis. Their art rejects everything McNeil and his generation valued: "engagement," self-expression, high-flown rhetoric, metaphor and symbolism. It is a truism that every gain represents a loss; the question now is whether what has been won is worth what has been sacrificed. The vulgarity and tastelessness that have characterized American art until the present have at least been vanquished; but in general they have been replaced by a tepid professionalism. The art schools are more advanced than painters like McNeil showing in the galleries, yet they seem unable to teach anything more than

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