

ALEXANDRE



At the Galleries
By KAREN WILKIN

GALLERIES OFTEN INSTALL WHAT A DEALER FRIEND calls “a selection of recent works by Mr. Group” during the summer months, as if coasting until the start of the fall’s new exhibition season. Yet last summer’s array of group shows, far from seeming merely expedient, included some carefully chosen, imaginatively assembled combinations, while a few memorable solo exhibitions and installations enlivened the mix. In Chelsea, the enigmatically titled “The Ghost in the Machine” at Lennon, Weinberg, selected by Stephen Westfall, was typical. (No, I can’t explain the title.) The show was an engaging assortment of abstractions by what was described as “historical figures”—John McLaughlin and Nicholas Krushenick—“mid-career painters”—Don Christensen, Harriet Korman, and Don Voisine—and “younger painters and sculptors”—Jennifer Riley, Jackie Meier, Thomas Raggio, and Rachel Beach—plus an imposing wall painting by Westfall himself, originally made for his recent one person exhibition at the gallery. The common factors among the disparate works were crisp edges and often impure or warped geometry, frequently combined, especially among the mid-career and younger artists, with intense color that sometimes verged on raucous.

The work of both the “historical”—i.e., late—McLaughlin and the “mid-career” Voisine was notable for its structural and chromatic restraint, in comparison to the complex shapes and full-throttle palettes of other selections; McLaughlin, especially, pointed to minimalism and alluded to the urban landscape, at the same time, as if paying simultaneous homage to Piet Mondrian, whom he obviously admired, and the California environment in which he lived. Several participants seemed to begin by acknowledging the center of the canvas and then making every effort, by means of shapes and color, to subvert the dominance of that acknowledged center. Others took the grid, metaphorically, if not literally, as a starting point, twisting and deforming it, even disrupting our memory of symmetry and order with unstable color relationships. Others took similar liberties with Euclidian shapes. A street-smart note was added by Krushenick’s work, which seemed as informed by cartoons and comic strip conventions as by geometry, while the razzle-dazzle color and cheerful, wonky shapes of Christensen’s paintings similarly suggested multiple allegiances, here to both illusionism and flatness as well as to a kind of antic playfulness. Westfall’s wall painting, by contrast, seemed at once bold and solemn, with saturated hues used to destabilize a confrontational, symmetrical image of concentric striped bands. The configuration echoed the cosmati work inlays and paving patterns in medieval Italian churches that Westfall studied during his recent Italian sojourn on a Prix de Rome. Like cosmati work, the wall painting was constructed with triangles and diamonds against vertical and horizontal oriented bands, here scaled up and, unlike cosmati work, syncopated by unruly color relationships.

All of the work selected by Westfall seemed generated by the improbable coexistence of the systematic and the unpredictable. Most works appeared exploratory rather than preconceived—something of a rarity, these days—reading not, as so much contemporary abstraction does, as illustrations of known conclusions, but rather as wholehearted efforts to find out what would happen if incompatible or contradictory impulses were brought to bear on a single canvas. Westfall, in an explanatory essay, notes that “All the work here stands for more than one thing: swoony craft, optical dazzle, compression and expansion; and an invocation of geometry’s traditional role as giving form to spirituality, expressed here as spiritedness.” “Spiritedness” rather than “spirituality” seemed to be the operative word. Cumulatively, the selection reminded us of just how expressive and various color and shape can be, affirming that art that primarily addresses the eye can equally address the intellect and the emotions with energy and brio.

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

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