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Richard Lorber

For over 20 years Pat Adams has biennially exhibited paintings. Without yet emerging as an artist in the foreground of the critical literature, she has steadfastly built her reputation as an innovative abstractionist and as an inspirational teacher at Bennington College, where she has taught since 1964. While the full measure of her artistic accomplishment might not be taken for some time—she is now very much in mid-career—one can begin to perceive that her trajectory of achievement is as much a function of her “entrance”¹ as of her sensibility, intelligence and talent.

“Modernism,” in its late romantic Abstract-Expressionist phase, provided the initial coordinates of Pat Adams’ vision, as plotted in her work of the early

1950s. Titles such as *Night Song, Hearts Rush* and *The Kiss* are indicative of the emotive impulse in these oils, as is the energetic brushwork that compartmentalizes the field with varying allover densities of irregular cubist planes (Tomlin and Guston come to mind). Linear features, suppressed in the painterly effusion of the earliest works, became more pronounced by the mid- and late ‘50s in biomorphic shapes and analogies with natural elements.

Coinciding with the “post-painterly” renovations of Abstract-Expressionism in the early 1960s, Adams’ surfaces through this decade consolidate in “sharp-contoured shapes, flat, large color areas, and broad wavy lines,”² without, however, sacrificing their empathetic identification with landscape morphology or their torques of feeling. Against a backdrop of mod-

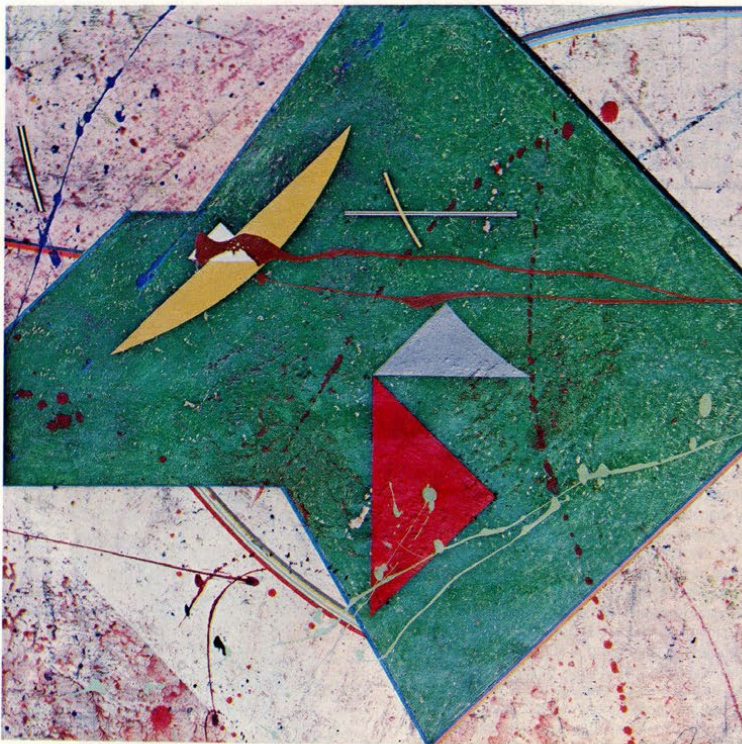
ernist thinking Pat Adams seems, in these years, to have been finding her own voice (note, by the way, the numerous vocalizing titles: *World Song, Noun Shouts*, etc.). By the ‘70s one can perceive her paintings less as a dialectical synthesis of the preceding decades’ styles than an intersection of their most polar qualities.

Small-scale works on paper through the mid-’70s—these are rarely longer than 24 inches on a side—in acrylic or gouache, ink, and mixed-media (mica flecks, etc.) present meticulously detailed, hard-edge forms overlaid like decals on allover, uniformly painterly fields. Works such as *That Which Starts Up, Table of Knowing II, or Night Time* of 1977 suggest the effect of the constructivist vocabularies of late Kandinsky, Malevich or Moholy-Nagy superimposed on the mottled, splattered, spotted fields of Pollock, Poussette-Dart or Olitski. Colliding but seemingly autonomous features build up multiple and divergent pictorial planes. Some disparate shapes and lines are embedded in, or handled with the same touch as, the field (often tonally muted, splotted and splattered), while other flatly painted elements seem almost collaged. The effect is reminiscent of those Schwitters collages in which many pasted bits are painted over and fused in the ground while others remain distinctly unadulterated.

If discussion of Pat Adams’ work were limited to developmental analysis and description by association one might label her an “Abstract-Eclecticist” and be done with it. That, however, would be insufficient. What passes for eclecticism is, in fact, a reorientation of esthetic objectives. Her work might well be classified in what George Kubler describes as a category of artistic and scientific invention where “extensions of a principle, or new explanatory principles . . . arise from confrontations among elements already given to the observer.”³ The principle which Adams’ art both extends and explains is modernism. And revisions of modernist orthodoxy are particularly significant now, given the current state of cultural directionlessness, artistic pluralism, and avant-garde exhaustion. (The increasing seriousness of critical attention to popular and traditional cultural forms is but one index of the growing mistrust of contemporary “high art” claims, as well as a support for post-modernist historical reevaluations.) Adams’ art reverses the reductivist, self-purifying ideology of modernism while pursuing esthetic “progress” through other characteristic self-critical, problem-solving strategies. What she redeems is, essentially, the romantic impetus of modernism, steeped, as it is, in Idealist and Existentialist thinking. This had foundered in modernism’s academically logical, but nihilistic, Minimalist extensions. Such romanticism is occasioned by the seeming impossibility of the modernist objective, which is, roughly, to achieve absolute oneness of form and content in a self-referential, autonomous work of art. Typically, in the 20th century, the modernist artist has been a rebellious, restless, quixotic romantic, with identity problems and transcendental yearnings, seeking to define individuality through artistic innovation which extinguishes individual style.⁴

Although terms such as modernism and romanticism have been so overused that they no longer carry the conviction of precise concepts, this in itself is

PAT ADAMS’ MODERNITY



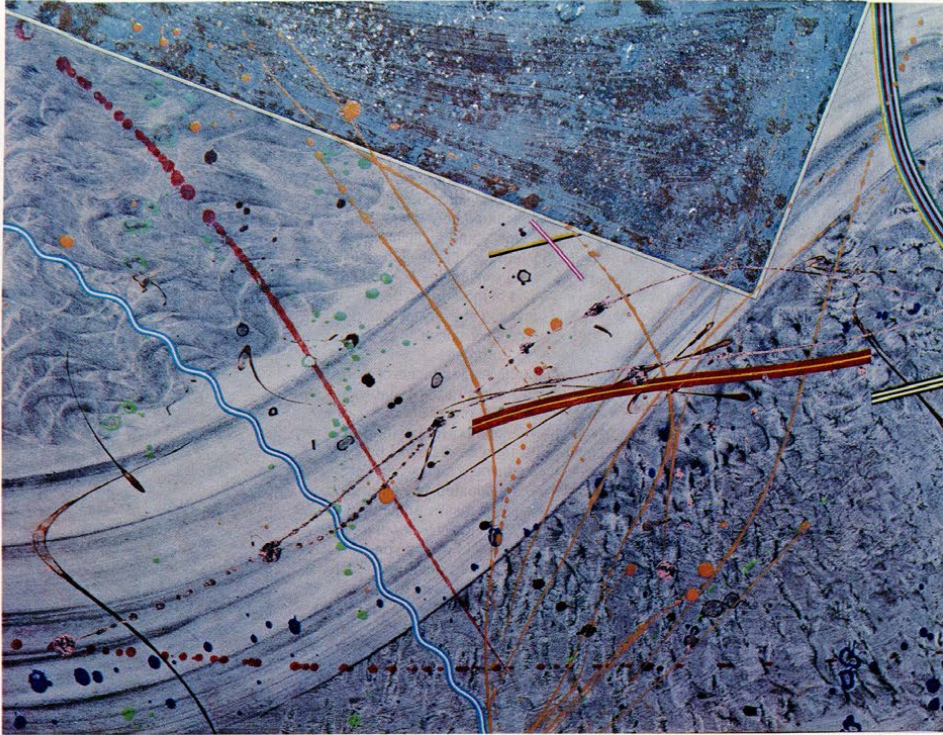
Pat Adams, *Table of Knowing I*, 1977, acrylic on canvas, 14 1/4 x 15 1/2.

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Pat Adams, *That Which Starts Up*, 1977, acrylic, ink and mica on paper.

indicative of the challenge faced in Pat Adams' work. Her revision or renewal of modernism can be understood as an ontology of abstract art rather than its teleology. In lieu of progressive contractions of form and content she has progressively differentiated and complicated their interactions. Working against the grain of the kind of self-emptying, deductive logic that resulted in Minimalism, she has accretively adapted the idioms of Constructivism, Surrealist automatism, Expressionism and allover field painting to generate an esthetic of abundance and variety. "What I have yet to see," she has recently written, "is some way to get it all, to subsume several allusions into one relationship. How will I know when it is right? By the exuberance of it, the ongoing stretch of spirit, the sense of nothing shut off, of each possibility opening out."⁵

Selected recent works, especially some small-scale mixed-media works on paper, concretize this statement. For example, in either *That Which Starts Up* or *Coming to It*, both of 1977, one senses a generative impulse that is the uniquely-reciprocal

interaction of a cerebrally premeditated compositional schemata with an automatism of touch. What Adams calls "morphological runs" seem to be the pictorial resonances of this interaction, the forces of the field (pointillist spotting in *Coming to It*, broad gestural ripples and sweeps in *That Which Starts Up*) equilibrating with the disparate energies of crystallized shapes and lines, which echo the structure of the support. Each of Adams' best works retains the volatile quality of an ongoing, self-activating event or disturbance in time and space that seems to sustain an initial generative impulse. Achieving this may be the point of her reference to "all that *innate* scanning before placement and location. . . . Visual Chomsky!"⁶

Although the nonobjectness or immateriality of Pat Adams' paintings does conform with modernist canons, their "theatrical" gesturalism and temporality—each work must be "read" in successive perceptions to absorb all the incidents of form—diverge from orthodoxy. To many observers the most disconcerting, or at least obvious, feature of Adams'

work has been her willful inconsistency in the painting of forms and field. A "schizoid" figure-and-ground relationship may casually seem the most distinctive characteristic of her recent "style"—effecting a pictorial insolubility that attenuates the sense of time in the work. Commenting on this "combination," Martica Sawin noted that Adams' recent art "tends to provoke a certain amount of perceptual resistance because of the eye's tendency to isolate and group the sharp focus lines and/or shapes, and its balkiness at encompassing the limitless expansion of the multicolored splotchy ground simultaneously with the linear elements and fixed shapes."⁷ In the same year, 1976, Hayden Herrera observed that this lack of integration of lines and shapes and the ground "gives Adams' paintings their peculiar tension."⁸

Judging from her latest works, exhibited in April of 1978, Adams has chosen to exacerbate further those tensions and perceptual resistances. Whereas the fields are uniform in most of the works dating from 1975–76 (and earlier), the subsequent paintings display shattered grounds, or fields disintegrating into

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forms. In *Situational*, for example, a geometric compartmentalization of the field (harking back, in a way, to the early '50s' expressionist-cubist orderings of space) gives the appearance of a map or aerial land view. Discrete "territories" or field areas in *Where We Are* provide an additional ground foil, heightening the pictorial discrepancy of crisp curvilinear forms that play freely over their boundaries. In *Table of Knowing I* an important ambiguity is introduced in a large centrally placed irregular geometric shape. Functioning strongly as a form, it is also a field for smaller shapes, and it seems to take up more total surface area than its own supporting ground. Numerous other works display surfaces fragmented in a new way for Adams. She seems to be interested now in creating episodic paintings within paintings which dislocate planes, interrupt painterly field rhythms, and fracture any potential gestalt. The effect is further to compound perceptual resistances, which, in turn, induces greater viewer alertness and, it may be added, viewer delight.

Valéry once asked: "May not the prime motive of any work be the wish to give rise to discussion, if only between the mind and itself?" Every skilled observer of art does, in a way, learn to listen to a work of art if only to hear that inner dialogue better. Within Pat Adams' art each work seems to carry on its own dialogue. A viewer may virtually eavesdrop on her paintings. What comes to be heard is a curiously agreeable debate. Despite distinctly opposing voices of fixity and flux, logic and chaos, necessity and accident, or whatever the "definition of oppositions . . . dirhythms,"⁹ the persistence of polar qualities in work after work stirs a sense of their binding attraction and common root. In modernist terms, the latest paintings of Pat Adams could be said to reveal the unity of figure and ground or of content and form only latently. Their holistic instantaneity is subliminal, cognitive more than optical—calculated, it would seem, to be operative at a lower, subconscious level of perceptual scanning. The hard-edge "realities" of the surfaces—rippling calligraphic stripes, rigid bands, piercing geometric shapes, and captive fragments of corners, arcs, skeins of paint—ultimately seem to breed out of the currents of the inchoate ground, as isolated gestural impulses merely more advanced in their pictorial gestation.

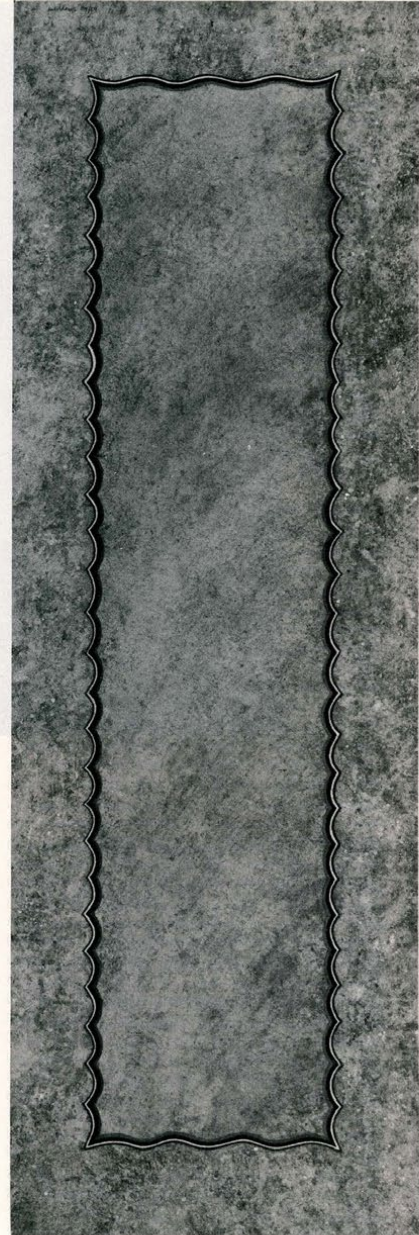
But the works have a life of their own in more than this metaphorical sense. For all the seeming arbitrariness or randomness of incident and design, Adams interposes between her formal tastes and manual execution semisystematic compositional rules. Automatism is adapted as a lawful principle of design, distilling a logic out of the painterly automatism that activates the field. Measurements derived from modular segments of the support, or from any other contrived or discovered "given," become behavioral guidelines in constructing the composition. In this Adams approaches the systemic impersonality of many a "post-modernist." Although she stops far short of averting all exercise of taste (notably, in her intuitively vivacious, though justly controlled, choices of color and tone), there is an evident aversion to formalistic hierarchies of "good design"—habits of balance and closure.

At this point it becomes appropriate to address directly a question which has been implicit throughout the discussion. What are the contemporary options for an artist, such as Pat Adams, who remains visibly committed to essential positions of modernism while aware that its logical extensions have progressed to exhaustion? Less an answer than an historical analogy suggests itself. At the peak of the High Renaissance, in early 16th-century Italy, so-called Mannerists in many of the arts responded to a sense of played-out esthetic options with a logical extension of the concept of technical mastery—*virtù*. This meant achieving stylish virtuosity and artificiality for its own sake, measured in terms of the invention and conquest of new formal difficulties.¹⁰ Similarly, the problem-solving ethos of modernism becomes a platform for virtuosic recycling of every stylistic position it had encompassed, as the vision at its core becomes degraded, academic, dogmatic.

Reversing the reductivist tendencies of modernism in her own work, Pat Adams has, inevitably, it would seem, gone the Mannerist route. In no way has this been a pejorative development for her (one becomes defensive in using a term so distorted by derision). The abundant resourcefulness she displays in mastering continually more complicated and intriguing problems of her own devising instills admiration. Being able to paint brilliantly in virtually every abstract style attains the Mannerist "spirit of virtuosic performance" only when the difficulties of so doing are technically and intellectually worthy of the talent to do so. For Pat Adams the difficulties have sustained the essential modernist purpose. Her astonishing virtuosity consists in her parenting of divergent pictorial languages which, in their intercourse, assert each painting's autonomy from her own ultimately taste-bound choices. The romanticism which is crucial to all this is the willingness to make the sacrifice of self—that is, of the limited self-expressionism that must be extinguished in order that a vision evolve. Reconciling the love of making art with the release of art from personal style remains the romantic modernist's dilemma. Even in a postmodern period, for Pat Adams this dilemma is an art-renewing challenge. ■

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1. George Kubler uses the term "entrance" to denote an individual's initial position in a cultural "sequence" which is a series of "linked solutions describing early and late stages of effort upon a problem"; *The Shape of Time*, New Haven, 1962, p. 35.
2. Marica Sawin, "So Much To See: Pat Adams' New Paintings," *Arts Magazine*, May 1976, p. 101. It may be noted that Sawin provides a useful "overview" of Adams' work in terms of its "neat division into thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, a division that corresponds up to a point, despite the highly personal and idiosyncratic qualities of her art, to broader artistic shifts."
3. Kubler, p. 69.
4. Stylistic differences among works of art may actually be levelled when artists solve problems individually toward a common stylistic or programmatic end. But the "sacrifice" of independent stylistic identities of the many is compensated by the exaggerated individualization or mythologizing of a few (cult of the artist-hero). Often their contribution seems more worthy of attention only because of the visibility of a "discovery" on the cutting edge of a problem. The situation in the problem-solving sequences of modernism approximates that in the sciences. A scientist working on a minutely particular problem can make a discovery which caps the efforts and claims the glories of years of work by countless nameless others who brought the problem to its peak of ripeness.
5. Pat Adams, "On Working," *Bennington College Quadrille*, II/4 (Fall 1977), p. 45.
6. Note from Pat Adams to the author, April 3, 1978.
7. Sawin, p. 101.
8. Hayden Herrera, in *Art in America*, July/August 1976, p. 101.
9. Pat Adams' letter to Virginia Zabriske, April 22, 1964, as quoted by Sawin, p. 100.
10. John Shearman, *Mannerism*, Harmondsworth (England), 1967, pp. 211.



Pat Adams, *Circumvent*, 1969, gouache on paper, 18 x 6".

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Pat Adams, *Hearts Rush*, 1953, watercolor on paper.



Pat Adams, *Table of Knowing II*, 1977, acrylic, ink and mica on paper, 20% x 14 1/4".



Pat Adams, *Together Come Rightly Many*, 1974, oil on canvas, 53 x 140".