

ART PAPERS

MAGAZINE

Art movements don't really seem to happen anymore, not even as merchandising strategies. There are tendencies, trends, sea changes; but where are the styles du jour of yesteryear? Even the ism-mongering of the '80s, when hype supplanted manifesto, is, like, sooo last decade. The buzz, then, surrounding The New Color Abstraction—buzz enough to earn the phenomenon an All-Caps Moniker—provokes at once excitement and suspicion. Is this the Real Thing, or just more hype?

The New Color Abstraction is, as it turns out, the real thing—as real, that is, as such things get in the simulacric era of capitalism triumphs. In fact, part of the punch packed by TNCA (if you'll permit the new style a bit of acronymy) is that it answers to the frisson that now pertains between the consumerist social condition and the recently emerged Internet, with its hypergraphic avalanche of information. TNCA mirrors the ferocious vibrancy and perpetual motion of most commercial websites while proffering imagery as product, imagery spun out in tireless, endless generation, imagery denser and more personalized than wallpaper, but (unlike the Pattern & Decoration art of the 1970s) no more visually articulated or profound—deliberately not.

The NCA has been traced in several public and commercial galleries in Los Angeles, revealing itself in the process to be a hot item not just here, but in other Western Sun Belt centers such as Houston and, omigod, Las Vegas. Its purported emergence in towns built on postwar American (and world) consumption hints at the larger social context in which this new abstract painting operates; in effect, it is a kind of Pop art of the spirit, appropriately distilling the landscape(s) of visual enticement into illegible ciphers and dazzling effects. In fairness, that's the reception-theory take on TNCA; the artists themselves operate in response to personal quirks as well as social environments, art-historical models as well as available technologies. That said, one does have to admit that the depthless, eye-popping color and a-compositional form available in the work of such artists as Aaron Parazette, Jason Eoff, Yek [sic], and other painters recently shown under peppy wish-I'd-coined-that rubrics such as "Fabstraction" and "Local Color" meets the eye much more than half way, noisily and busily bombarding it with stimuli that are easily read (if almost painful to look at), superficially complex but ultimately unitary, and beautiful, or at least attractive, but not in the least subtle. It's screen-saver painting.

In a show last winter at California State University Los Angeles, critic David Pagel identified TNCA as the natural inheritor of Color Field Painting—you know, the stuff Clement Greenberg was telling everybody to paint in the 1960s. Pagel didn't go far enough; as indicated, TNCA is a mongrel, descending not just from Helen Frankenthaler and Jules Olitski, but from Pop, Pattern Painting, and the late-'60s Finish/Fetish version of Minimalism peculiar to Los Angeles, as well as the vacated Neo-Geo of the last decade. But Pagel was right to locate TNCA's gene pool in the post-Abstract Expressionist era. He was also observant in highlighting the prominent role younger women artists are playing in TNCA. In L.A. at least, women do predominate among the first and best New Color Abstractionists.

Monique Prieto, featured in Pagel's show, is everyone's TNCA paradigm. Her paintings follow a basic figure-ground schema, irregular blobs of color set off against bright white grounds. Such a formula would not have been at all foreign to the integrity-of-the-picture-plane painters teaching at Bennington or Hunter College ca. 1967. But Prieto empties the formula of all coloristic nuance, presenting us not with hard-candy versions of

Olitski, but melted-crayon versions of Kenneth Noland or even Ellsworth Kelly. In fact, Prieto recapitulates, if anyone, the lesser-known lights of Greenberg's gang, artists such as Paul Feeley and Ray Parker whose formal eccentricities injected unpredictable and even humorous touches into the flatness doctrine. She amplifies those eccentricities into a formal vocabulary of what seem to be trained amoebas, each one a different designer color, wrapping themselves around one another, seeping into nether corners and into one another's crooks and cavities, pinching themselves into goofy contortions.

Prieto's fifth show in six years at ACME (April 26–May 22) had her working large and small—and the small stuff was the more winning. The large canvases may work well individually, but together they began to enervate one another, clamoring rather too insistently for physical space and the viewer's attention. Reduced in reproduction, they effervesce; but at their actual near-monumental scale, each spanning six to eight feet, they suggested that Prieto has plateaued. Nothing wrong with that; she's earned the right to even out, and her aesthetic certainly allows for a little bit of affectlessness now and then. But Prieto, natively, is a cleverer and more exciting artist than that. And it was in her new aquatints, limpid and slyly zany, that her wit and pictorial deftness reasserted themselves. Here her shapes and colors are more extreme (although not more vivid) than ever in their saccharine pastels and their baroque lumpiness or stick-figure attenuation. The sense of animation that has dwindled in her canvases suffuses through the prints. Is it because the aquatints more closely approximate the computer screen, on which Prieto apparently pre-composes many of her compositions? No; she has already proven that her method works large as well as small, and this time, the small pieces just worked better.

Similarly, the recent work of another distaff New Color Abstractionist, **Ingrid Calame**, shown at Karyn Lovegrove (April 9–May 15), came off better in the "minor" media than in the major. Calame's solo show featured five enamel-on-aluminum paintings, three of them four feet square, the others two feet square, plus four "working drawings" on trace mylar sheets. The paintings featured the same flat, uninflected color and extravagantly nervous, ambulatory contours as found in Prieto's canvases—just a lot more of them, with a lot more discontinuity. The discontinuity, at least, results from Calame's professed source for these shapes (if not colors): stains and blots, found on floors and sidewalks, which she traces and ultimately transforms into paintings. This introduces an abasement factor into the work, but in the context of TNCA, in which Calame figures with increasing prominence, such a factor—a sexy issue at the beginning of the decade—means little. Indeed, TNCA tends, quite deliberately, to render its source material insignificant, abstracting it into a forest of signs and then defoliating the forest. Only the resultant optical effect endures: it's the self-conscious, self-declared, and self-parodying victory of beauty over content.

It's tempting to claim that Calame's drawings—which at 30 inches square were of a scale comparable to the paintings—were more "successful" than the paintings because they are closer to the source material. But they came off better simply because they posit Calame's characteristic shapes transparently: only the contours are evident, and these are described with colored lines. The paintings present the same kind poster-flat, yuppie-M&M colors as found in Prieto's new acrylics, only more of them, coming at you thick and fast, almost audibly in their splay and scatter. (Calame names them with appropriate ono-

matopoeia: *BOF pf, fsstCK, Boompa Sloomp...*)

And, like Prieto's paintings, Calame's—which hark back in some ways to Abstract Expressionism itself (albeit the "second generation" Ab Ex of painters like Norman Bluhm and James Brooks)—can be too much of a good thing when seen in a bunch rather than singly. The drawings, however, make sense together; their tracing-paper elucidation of process imparts a feeling of sequence in the aggregate, and the transparency of their forms prevents any one of them from pulling attention away from the others.

Calame's exhibition could be seen up a flight of stairs from Prieto's in what has become Los Angeles' hottest gallery location, the 6150 Wilshire building, hard by L.A.'s "Museum Row." The prevalence of TNCA in this vest-pocket West-Chelsea is as clear an indication as any that the tendency is très hip. One storefront down is POST, the "midtown" annex of the downtown artist-run space which has emerged as a launching pad for young artists (Calame debuted there two years ago), and a mainstay for certain older ones as well. POST can no longer be thought of as a farm team for galleries such as those clustered at 6150; it's joined the Wilshire league, and is playing for keeps. And it led the league with its show of **Didi Dunphy's** "upholstery" sculptures (February 12–March 13).

In career if not in age, Dunphy is just slightly older than Prieto and Calame, but comes from a lot more self-avowed feminist roots—second-wave, '80s feminism, in which patriarchal structures and icons are not so much attacked as deconstructed. In Dunphy's case, in fact, da Man is veritably tickled into submission. She used to appropriate modernist male artworks (is that redundant?) and feminize them, as when she created knitting-kit versions of Frank Stellas and the like. In her most recent work, however, Dunphy recapitulates modernist tropes much less frontally. Across the floor of the gallery she scattered several pieces of—well, as she calls them, upholstery. Built of wood, stuffed with foam, and covered with stitched naugahyde, these objects resemble furniture but, for the most part, are too small and/or oddly shaped to function as much more than footrests or pillows. They are decidedly sculptural, in their spatial disposition as well as their form, and they hark back to all sorts of 1960s sculptural tropes—the Minimalist elementalism of Robert Morris and Donald Judd, Funk eccentricity (one piece resembles the legendary *Slant Step*), and even kinetic sculpture (who remembers Robert Breer?), as well as Claes Oldenburg's gargantuan consumer things. Oldenburg's first wife, Pat, used to sew his mid-'60s kapok pieces, and with these stitch-intensive works Dunphy pays oblique homage to this female hand hidden in Pop history. And, of course, she tweaks the menfolk with her disruptions of their scale and their formal vocabularies—and their color. Dunphy has dyed her naugahyde the most intense, even garish solid colors—hues that would look outré in a kid's room. But in the context of this neo-Minimalist subversion, such hot pinks and powder blues and fire-engine reds hit just the right wrong note. And, in the context of the burgeoning New Color Abstraction movement—there, I called it a movement—Dunphy's color sense, as well as her arch sense of recent art, is right on time. Even more than for Prieto or Calame, for Dunphy, art history repeats itself, the second time as farce.

Peter Frank, Los Angeles