

CHEIM & READ



Punchy Pop Parodies of Abstraction

Jonathan Lasker ♦s cartoon-like pictographs are deceptively simple

BY MARIO NAVES 4/23/2007

The refrain of “I Like ‘Em Big and Stupid,” singer and comedienne Julie Brown’s little-remembered 80’s-era pop exegesis on female desire, came to mind while I was looking at Jonathan Lasker’s paintings at Cheim and Read Gallery. Mr. Lasker’s work is big and stupid—obvious and gross, too. All the same, it merits contemplation. Only a sophisticated artist could get away with paintings as ham-handed as these.



COURTESY CHEIM & READ

Image kit: Jonathan Lasker ♦s *Reasonable Love*, 2007.

Mr. Lasker was a key participant in the Conceptual Painting scene, a loosely defined school of abstraction that was briefly in vogue during the early 1990’s. Its practitioners approached the art of painting from the outside in: Putting brush to canvas was a cerebral enterprise, a hyper-conscious commentary on the medium as cultural and historical phenomenon. They operated on the assumption that painting had pretty much exhausted its power, and they questioned its relevance by placing scare quotes a mile high around their art. Chilly contrivance was the rule.

The majority of conceptual painters were control freaks enamored with their own smarts. The better ones—Stephen Ellis, especially, and (sometimes) David Row, Lydia Dona and Richard Kalina—transcended their sleek expertise in the ensuing years by slackening the reins a bit. Sensuality wriggled out, often inadvertently, from underneath process and strategy.

Then there’s Mr. Lasker, who refers to his art as an “image kit” and declares that his purpose is to instill “a self-awareness of how one construes a painting.” His description conveys an accurate sense of detachment: In Mr. Lasker’s hands, image and mark (less so color and composition) are means that remain means. With painstaking clunkiness, the paintings transform their components into signifiers—symbols of form, not altogether the real thing. Each canvas is a rebus of painterly affectation.

They’re hardly ingratiating, but they are, in their own perverse way, lovable. Mr. Lasker’s M.O. is to denature the brush stroke. His punchy and cartoon-like pictographs amount to a Pop parody of abstraction. Forget nuance or intuition: Mr. Lasker’s marks are utterly rational. They’re also, at crucial moments, brute in their physicality, delineating form with trailing and tactile gobs of paint. To work neatly with a substance as malleable and greasy as oils takes considerable planning. Spontaneity is sacrificed for calculation.

Mr. Lasker engages in a purposefully inconclusive dialogue about figure and ground. Bulky, diagrammatic forms—which, at times, achieve a grudging

547 WEST 25 STREET NEW YORK NY 10001 TEL 212 242 7727

FAX 212 242 7737 GALLERY@CHEIMREAD.COM

biomorphism—abut or overlay meticulously delineated scrawling. Nothing in the paintings sits quite right. Shapes plop into the compositions (or, rather, anti-compositions) with an oddly satisfying bluntness. Impastoed, superimposed crisscrossing marks are a recurring motif. Thick fields of slathered paint simultaneously open up and congest the canvases. Talk about conundrums: Mr. Lasker's paintings are clarified *and* incoherent.

The images are arrays of faux doodles, sign-like and frontal. They sit, adamantly and unapologetically, on the surface. Forms aren't cradled in an illusionistic space; they are built from the canvas up. In this respect, they recall Jackson Pollock's looping skeins and Cy Twombly's scribbled patchworks: Drawing does the heavy lifting; paint is merely the medium. Mr. Lasker is more to my taste: Better to be upfront about one's machinations than to hide behind expressionist monotony or tinny elegance.

In Cheim and Read's back gallery, there's a suite of postcard-sized works that, with slight variations in color and complication, are studies for Mr. Lasker's monumental canvases. (The paintings can measure up to roughly eight by 10 feet.) His tack is relatively straightforward here: Squiggled glyphs are scaled to within a hand's grasp; gesture, however limited, is pitched to the perimeters of the page.

The studies possess greater pictorial integrity and feel much less removed than their expansive counterparts. Yet, in the end, the big paintings are preferable. Mr. Lasker is nothing if not pretentious: He's at his most winning when his distillations of painterly issues are blown up to absurdly grandiose proportions. He's the Cecil B. DeMille of post-conceptual formalism. He undercuts pompous intentions by slyly acknowledging and mocking the work's blinkered concerns. Mr. Lasker may not be completely aware of his own jokes, but that doesn't diminish his oddball appeal.

Will anyone not versed (or interested) in the minutiae of painting get anything out of this? They'll enjoy Mr. Lasker's goofiness, that's for sure. Perhaps they'll be diverted by his blaring, synthetic palette and lumpish flirtations with the decorative. How long they'll linger is the question. I suspect the most admiring audience will be composed of fellow painters: Specialization is Mr. Lasker's stock in trade. This is art for art's sake, rendered inelegant and deceptively stupid. It's a perplexing and noteworthy accomplishment.

Jonathan Lasker is at Cheim and Read, 547 West 25th Street, until May 5.

