

Above: Michael Sinclair *Primaries (Red, Yellow, Blue)*, 1999, oil on canvas, each 16" x 16". Below right: *Fate of Nations*, 1999, oil on canvas, 32" x 32".

A Luminous Accommodation of Abstraction

Heather Lustfeld

Karen Owsley Nease explores elements of gestural abstraction balanced with precision and restraint in her *New Paintings*, at Joseph Nease Gallery. For Owsley Nease, the paintings have been incubating for a couple of years, representing what she feels to be her first adult group of works. "I'm happy with these," Nease said in a recent gallery visit. "I think they're where I need to be right now; they're something I can continue to develop and stay with for a while."

Her highly controlled paintings are inspired by the confluence of cities and forests, architecture and painting, and naturally occurring grids and systems. Within dark, tactile grounds are phantom-like suggestions of structures and landscapes; or a shift in perspective yields a surface of peeling paint on squares of brick or stone, or bark from a tree. The paintings are both illusionistic, playing with the figure/ground relationships, and surface oriented, emphasizing the physicality of the painted two dimensional plane. They are serious and proficient works, executed in thick layers of oil on canvas or linen with a painting knife.

Upon entering the gallery are three small paintings (16" x 16"), a triptych entitled *Primaries (Red, Yellow, Blue)*. Matte colors emerge from their cracked surfaces, particularly lively in the third primary, blue. Peeking from the blue

ground are flickers of red, gold and black, lighter in tone than much of the work in the show. Though Nease has favored a dark palette in much of her work, a tendency toward experimentation and the incorporation of a lighter palette is evident in her new paintings.

Much of the work is based in implied perception and tactility and often exudes a focused visual electricity. For example, figure/ground relationships are made ambiguous via color relationships, evident in works such as *Red Rain* (1999). The large, square oil painting (48" x 48") is composed in layers of red, obscuring a field of gray and blue. Narrow, spry slits of gray-blue and black streak down the thick red curtain of paint with anxious energy, somewhat similar to Pat Steir's waterfall paintings. The vibrant, shallow field illustrates Nease's attempt to generate a sense of restrained space for the viewer, which she describes as "potential versus kinetic energy."

Nease earned her bachelors degrees in Environmental Design and Architectural Engineering from the University of Kansas, Lawrence in 1983. But after eight years in the field, she decided to pursue her desire to be a painter, earning a BFA from Kansas City Art Institute in 1993. She continues to work part time as an architectural designer. She remembers her early approach to landscape as being realistic, but ultimately found her artistic voice through abstraction.

Her current approach, informed

through training as an architect, recall elements of 1950s abstraction, as well. Aspects of Antoni Tàpies' peeling, textured collages on canvas strike a certain semblance, but are not direct influences. Nease sites Agnes Martin as a "painting hero," but does not emulate her style. Her primary influences, she claims, are writers, including the work of Japanese author Haruki Murakami. She seeks relationships between humans and the land, finding harmony within the dichotomy.

Texture and allusions to man-made structures and nature prevail as visual metaphors in most of the paintings. Some of the pieces, such as *Byzantine No. 1*, emphasize the surface and patterning with luminous bronze and gold tones, accented with black creases and punctures covering the picture plane. Touches of metallic paint in this and similar pieces gleam, creating

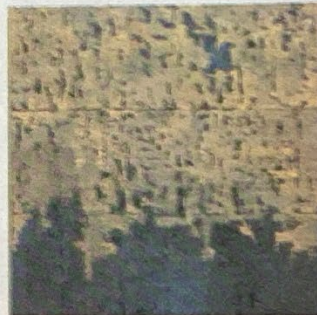
smooth, warm and reflective areas. The square canvases, in some cases, look very design-oriented, with regular, consistent patterns and an emphasis on the surface. The monochromatic nature of some works, like the diptych *Positive/Negative* (1999), appears like relief carving, the protruding lines and wrinkles evoking the wet, doughy drapery of classical sculptures.

But the most provocative works veer from a purely surface approach to painting, incorporating a medium between illusionism and tactility. *Terroir*, for example, references landscape with rhythmic line and shadow on a dark, red-

covered ground. The composition is delicately rendered with fluidity, achieving an intriguing space. In contrast to the stern verticality of certain paintings, the composition is softer with nebulous forms and relaxed line quality, varying from choppy vertical or horizontal dashes of paint. Similar in tone, *Grey Lady* is composed with nuances of warm grey and softly blended lines, the upper third with a tantalizing hint of architectural ruins in the form of a snippet of colonnades.

Another strong work, *Fate of Nations* (1999), utilizes a stark contrast of pale yellow and grey cracked grounds, with sinuous grey forms seeping up and into the dry, dusty-yellow. While resembling countries on a map, the forms also evoke trees or mountains below an incised horizon line. The idea of the horizon is, in fact, of great import to Nease, who is prompted by what she sees in nature. This set of work, in part, was inspired by trips to Minnesota and Lake Superior, where she found the sense of space fascinating and impacting. Capitalizing and exploiting the inherent contradiction and tension of implying space on a flat surface is a proliferative concern.

Nease's new paintings embody a variance of color, with touches of luminosity; but the subdued, somber palette resounds in titles like *Gun and Knife*.



The steely, overall ground of *Knife*, for example, is punctuated with bright red slashes, easily read as blood, but with the help of the title. In this sense, the titles are a further illusionistic anchor, fostering certain interpretations. A smaller painting called *Carrot Cake* is the color of cinnamon, decadent and rich with thoughtful variations in execution, becoming lyrical. Rather than evoking anxious dread, the power of suggestion is of sumptuousness.

Nease commented on the desire to create, at some point, a "white painting," a divergence from the heavy palette she now employs. The containment and overall nature of these articulations of pattern and space leave room for expansion. Within this show, there are various transgressions, all of which, at some level, point to the possibility of future directions of experimentation and discovery.

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