



A TIME FOR ABSTRACTION

Chuck Stern is a gentle, soft-spoken artist, not an angst-ridden one. Over the last two years, he has spent many quiet hours, music softly playing in the background, producing a new set of abstract images, and he says, “I love these paintings... I’m really at peace with these works.” And yet he adds that there are times when he has no idea where a particular painting is going, how he’s going to get out of it. He has learned that doubt, disturbing, pervasive doubt, is, at some point in the process, necessary and important. No longer worried, he trusts that doubt is good, it will ultimately provide new insights, new vocabulary, new visual tools.

One of his current primary tools is a grid, a network of lines drawn over the entire canvas. This practice began when he used the grid as a traditional transfer device, copying a small reproduction of a Picasso painting onto a larger surface. In the process he discovered that he liked beginning his own paintings with a grid pattern. From there on, he declares, it’s a free-for-all. But what might seem a playful exercise ends, for this artist, in serious visual discoveries, such as the tiny red dots that dramatically alter the sense of space in the work “*Small Revelations*.”

Another tool: talking with dead artists, people who are important to him. He recently completed a series of three vertical canvases, two forming a relatively compact diptych, the third slightly apart. Their title is “*After Pompeii*,” since they began with a rendition of a floral garland from an ancient Pompeian wall painting, now completely erased or painted over, transformed into a cascading series of cubes among other things. The Catalan artist Antoni Tàpies died while Chuck was at work on these paintings and so several small square Tàpies crosses (+) appear in them: “I was talking to him that day.” Flattened or borrowed objects or a general sensibility derived from one of his favorite artists turn up often in these works as a kind of homage, a thanks, pointing to the wide-ranging lineage of his art. A geometric cone-shape in “*After Parade*” comes from the 20th century American precisionist, Peter Blume. “*Gregory’s Walk*” implies the way the telling remarks of his dead friend Gregory Gillespie float through his mind: “Try it, if you don’t like it, you can just paint it out.” “*Tiepolo’s Dream*”: “That’s a painting as close as I can feel to his work,” the ethereal sketches and ceiling paintings of the 18th century Venetian artist, Giambattista Tiepolo.

Chuck is adamant that his current paintings only have to do with him, not a hypothetical outside audience. So what would he like to hear viewers say?—simply that they took a lot of time in front of a work, that’s a home run. Why this artist would produce a particular abstract composition in response to his own poetic or imaginative experience might at times remain a mystery, yet to grasp his creative process as he develops these images, it could also be helpful to look at an earlier representational still life. In “*Red Pot for Gregory*” varied floor or tile patterns, foreshortened edges of tables, sculptural ceramic objects turning in space, intensely worked over details, erasures indicating process and change, all these appear. And they show up transformed in his abstract art as well, recording a dance in time and space. He burrows into a small area of the image or leaves only faint tracks in another, whether the painting portrays recognizable objects or a non-figural design. At the end he feels that some paintings seem sure of themselves while others have an unsettled quality, also appealing. And then, “you’re done, your parenting is over,” this from a man whose studio served at times as a place from which he could tend his growing son.

His preference for an artistic medium does change over what seem to be 10-year cycles, from painting to photography to sculptured pottery and back. About the new works, he says he does design sculpture in his head while he’s painting, some of the paintings could be sculpture, and he wouldn’t have gotten to these paintings without going through sculpture. Why did he move to two-dimensional abstract works several years ago? He doesn’t have a choice, he just does whatever it is time to do. “It can’t be much richer than being here now.”