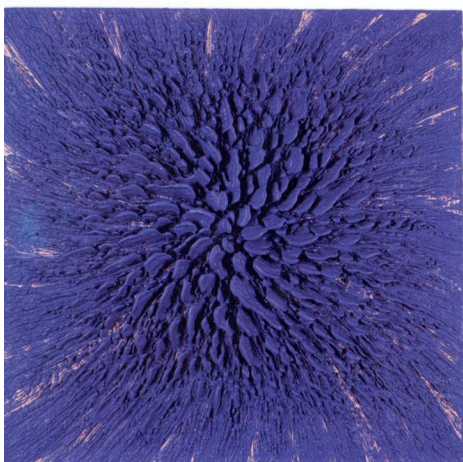


A New Iconography for Abstract Art

Two artists inspired by science and nature show that painting doesn't need to be figurative to have content. BY BARBARA ROSE



New York School giant Mark Rothko is credited with saying that there is no such thing as a good painting about nothing. This belief was shared by a number of his colleagues, who set up a study center on East 8th Street in 1948 called "The Subjects of the Artists." Their goal was to distinguish abstraction from simply another form of decoration. Rothko, Robert Motherwell, William Bazotes and sculptor David Hare were the founders of the school, which eventually became the Artists' Club, where Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, critic Harold Rosenberg and Rothko lectured.

Pop and minimal art, with their conceptual as opposed to emotional bias, cooled off this debate for several decades. Now content-loaded abstraction is back again, challenging cerebral irony with seriousness. Lots of the work today is little more than

illustrated political propaganda, but there are artists focused on giving meaning to abstract images. Some, like the late Al Held and Dorothea Rockburne, found inspiration in physics and astronomy. Others like Dennis Ashbaugh and Martin Kline look to science and nature as a common language that is neither abstruse nor exotic, but rather what has become everyday experience in a rapidly changing world where the basic concepts of human existence and evolution are being challenged.

This month, the works of Kline and Ashbaugh are on view: At the Jason McCoy Gallery in New York, Kline is showing a series of oil stick-on-canvas works made in Japan in which samurai-like imagery breaks through the abstract surfaces. At the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C., Ashbaugh is exhibiting a selection of paintings dealing with viruses, genetic mutations and DNA sequences that

Dennis Ashbaugh, "You Cannot Hide," 2005, fluorescent oil paint on canvas. Martin Kline, "Blue Heart" (above, left), 2000, encaustic on panel.

travels in expanded version to Spain's Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno next year.

At first, Ashbaugh and Kline might seem radically dissimilar. Kline's refinement is in many ways diametrically opposed to Ashbaugh's brasher and more gestural style. But as two artists determined to reclaim meaning and freshness for abstraction, they have certain elements in common.

For example, both use heavily textured and layered surfaces that appeal as much to tactility as opticality, thus rejecting the smoothness and graphic quality of color-field painting. Their images also create tension between seduction and repulsion.



Kline, "Nature Morte" (above), 2003, bronze. Kline, "Scream" (left), 2005, oil on canvas. Ashbaugh, "Just Watch Me" (below, left), 2005, fluorescent oil paint on canvas.

impastoed encaustic paintings or the prickly extrusions of his cast-bronze sculptures, one cannot isolate the physical from the cerebral. As an abstract artist, he does not depict landscapes, yet analogies with bark, blossoms and fungus are evident.

Ashbaugh's series of "rust" paintings, whose structure continues to be inspired by genetic code, contain charred areas suggestive of cosmic black holes as well as of the decay of the industrial "rust belt" destroyed by the outsourcing of American factory

work. The Ashbaugh exhibition concludes with the colorful series of "camouflage" paintings based on ways that nature conceals living creatures, such as tropical fish, so that, in the artist's words, they are "hiding in plain sight."

Neither artist engages in clever postmodernist manipulation, perhaps because they, like Pollock, Clyfford Still and Robert Rauschenberg, for example, are not the products of big cities and their career-directed art schools, but rather of those rugged anonymous towns in middle America where people work too hard to play sophisticated Duchampian mind games. Kline was raised near a diary farm with his 12 siblings in Norwalk, Ohio, and Ashbaugh, the grandson of a blacksmith and a farmer, was born in Red Oak, Iowa.

Looking at the raised surfaces of Kline's

In both cases, intense physical labor is involved in the execution of their work: Their paintings are not stratified formulas, but investigations into how to infuse abstraction with meaning.

For Ashbaugh, the idea that science could provide imagery for abstract art was originally suggested by Newman's watercolor of the late '40s inspired by biological processes. In 1990, Ashbaugh began using DNA sequencing documented by digital imaging as a basis for large-scale painting often the size of Rothko's, Newman's or Pollock's mural-size works, of layered stair that drift through an ambiguous atmosphere that has its antecedents in Turner's paintings of smoke and mist as well as in Miró's cosmic imagery.

Martin Kline's paintings and sculpture take John Cage's advice to imitate nature in its manner of operation. They are strong physical presences that take on form through literal processes of growth. The buildup and direction of the strokes made by applying layers of beeswax do not actually replicate nature, yet they intentionally allude to growth, a natural process inevitably reminding one of natural form and cycles.

Kline does not try to compete with nature but rather to create objects, which although related to natural cycles, are clearly man-made, "not uncoincidentally," he says: "made during a time when nature is being manipulated in the lab, on the fields, and on people too."

This concern with the unnaturalness of mutations and hybrids is another theme common to the two artists. Today it is hearing to find artists who are not seeking simplistic formulas or denying the realities of our times, but are rather confronting difficult and at times painful, themes without turning their backs on aesthetic concerns. ☾

Art historian and critic Barbara Rose lives in both New York and Madrid, Spain, where her exhibition "Express: Rauschenberg in the Fast Lane" is on view at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum.