

ARTFORUM

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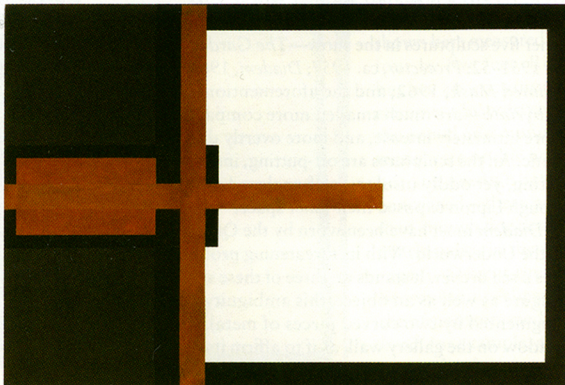
I N T E R N A T I O N A L

SUMMER PREVIEW
ART IN RIO
CILDO MEIRELES

Harvey Quaytman

McKEE GALLERY

Committed describes the relationship between Harvey Quaytman (who died in 2002) and the McKee Gallery (which has represented the artist since it opened in 1974), as well as the dedication with which the artist approached his career-long exploration of abstraction's topography. During this show's opening-night panel, numerous canonical modernist names, from Władysław Strzemiński to Willem de Kooning, were



Harvey Quaytman,
Voyager, 1991, acrylic
and rust on canvas,
60 x 90".

thrown about in historical association, and investigating any number of these affiliations would be productive. And yet this compact survey encouraged us to first consider Quaytman's work along its own, unflagging trajectory: as paintings that might have, in his words, a "sense of integrity and avoidance of easy answers."

But what, first, are the questions? An obvious place to start might be with surface: How can it be awakened, given an interior life? In works from *Becky's Drawing*, ca. 1973–74, across which white acrylic is splattered like remnants from a whipped-cream canister, to the dense, sludgy *Spector, 1990*, which, though it looked like it might date from 1915, was actually one of the most recent pieces in the show, Quaytman employed an almost sculptural process of working up materials into form. The mustard-yellow Plexiglas that appears within *Untitled, 1977*, yields, on later canvases, to more subtle grades of applied paint that pool in terraced layers (sometimes as if notched windows). I wished I could lay these works flat and place a magic marble on their surface that would roll, without harm, along their textured planes; its path would tell us a lot about the landscape of the paintings. (In fact, Quaytman often worked horizontally, with his canvases on sawhorses, and he shaped them all himself.) Imagine, for instance, tracking the steep, calligraphic arc of *Kufkind, 1970*.

Such suspended movement seemed to propel Quaytman's inquiry into line. What happens when a line runs over an uneven surface? When a line stops short, before the edge of a canvas with a level ground? When a line, pulled to its taut limits, snaps back? In *Tip, 1981*, this tension is acknowledged in buoyant play. The painting has an unexpected swerve in the bottom right of its otherwise rectangular frame, as if its depicted wave form kicked the edge out just a little.

How do you work systematically, but still surprise? Another strategy to avoid static cling involved the use of startling bolts of color. Interspersed with a Minimalist palette are the weird purples and yellows of *Paris, Corners, 1988*, which do the impossible of making its namesake city kitschy, while the adjacent *Blenheim, 1987*, in streaked magenta and black, evokes a sweater that I'd like to forget from that same decade. Here, Quaytman's persistent undercoating was apparent: Specks of royal-blue deposits poke out from a choppy black, just as orange does in *The Colors of the Prophets, 1990*. The artist never mixed colors, which may also account for the thickness of the acrylic: Each introduced hue has its tiered place. But he *did* mix stuff into his paint, including crushed glass (giving some shapes sheen) and, most effectively, rust.

This is not the heavy patina of Richard Serra's shipyards. Quaytman cultivated rust as if rare orchids, pouring metal filings onto his canvas and then watering them (with silver foil keeping the liquid in its place). Like an expression of its own alchemy of time, rust began and ended the show, in a drawing from 1970 by the entrance and a painting from 1987 in the final room—but hanging somewhere in the middle, *Voyager, 1991*, was the standout work. Any artist might hope to create a passage as satisfying as the off-center cross of ferrous burnt umber protruding like a cantilever into the creamy white square of the canvas's right. Other than my experience of the broad but barely perceptible spectrum among the cruciforms of Ad Reinhardt's Black Paintings at David Zwirner gallery in New York this past fall, I can't recall a time I was more mesmerized by one intersection in an abstract painting.

—Prudence Peiffer