

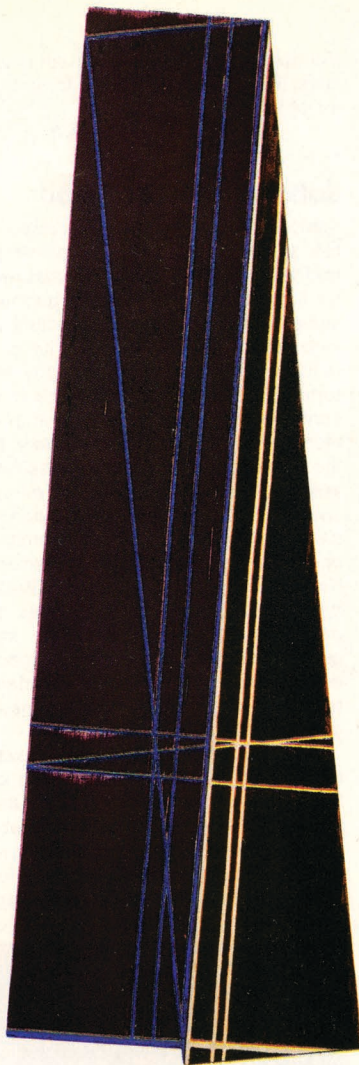
Harvey Quaytman at David McKee

In Harvey Quaytman's paintings, the edge of the canvas generates dramas of form. A decade back, he turned the lower edge into a narrow bar with its ends angled upward. The rest of the painting was a vast slab of color, curved along its own lower edge. Cradled by the bar, its particular shape and hue would either set it weightlessly afloat or force it downward against the linear springiness of the smaller element. A number of variants evolved from this format, among them an anchor-shape. Here the wide slab of the earlier paintings was compressed into a thin vertical form. Its curving lower edge became the anchor's "flukes"—arced extensions pointing upward left and right.

The drama here was in the canvas's departure from its originally rectangular form. The arcs were the result and, thanks to their outline and interior patterns, they were also the eye's means of reconstructing a work's evolution to its strange shape. Though Quaytman never reduces a canvas to a diagram of its own making, it seemed fairly clear that the anchor-shapes charted the pendulum motion of a tall rectangle. Traced backward from what could be seen, this lost shape took on a significance that rectangularity rarely has when a painter leaves it visible. By refusing to take the four 90-degree angles of painting's traditional support as simply given, Quaytman suggests they are impossible to give up. To count as a painting, a canvas must acknowledge this basic structure by turning its own structure into an elaborate variant—or so the drama of Quaytman's shaping suggests. At each point of the drama's development, renunciation of the rectangle becomes a complex acceptance. The denouement provided by each of his successful paintings always comes at the moment when the eye makes its way through odd angles and curves to an understanding that the primal shape is still there, virtually if not actually, as fresh and sturdy as ever.

Some of the anchor-shapes were asymmetrical, with each side of the canvas mounted on a separate stretcher. Quaytman began in these works to generate his color patterns from layerings and scrapings which brought out the architecture of the underlying woodwork. Color served as a direct indication of structure, yet never a simple one. Each side of the anchor-shape would have its own set of hues. These were often harsh. When two were brought together in a finished painting, the clash was sometimes violent. The eye had to fight its way through to the denouement, yet this was nearly always possible. The rectangle exerts such an extraordinary power over Quaytman's imagination that every nuance of his heavy textures, every flurry of internal line, every "impossible" juxtaposition of colors, can be the starting point for a return to that pristine zone of origins.

In recent seasons, Quaytman has



Harvey Quaytman: *My Life and Music*, 1979, acrylic on canvas, 110½ by 37½ inches; at David McKee.

left the "flukes" off his paintings, and he has cooled down his palette considerably. Some of these newly severe versions of the pendulum-rectangle were on view at his latest exhibition. What was extravagantly complex is now subtly complex. The drama is still rich with tension. There is no easy way through Quaytman's labyrinth of the particular to his changeless goal, painting's four-cornered universal. The pace has gotten more stately, however. Muted colors have led to more intricately worked textures and reduced the clutter of internal lines. And this general calm has brought something more—a reappearance of the rectangle.

This show presented the beginnings of a new series of nearly square paintings in which the pressure on rectangularity is exerted from inside the frame. A line begins in a corner and arcs across the surface toward its central regions. Moving on to an edge, the line stops, marking a point from which another line curves inward. A third line links the first two, creating an elegantly irregular three-sided shape which questions rectangularity with each arcing nuance yet breaks through the standard format in the lower right-hand corner. In the exhibition's largest painting, there is not even this

trace of Quaytman's extravagant shapings. The black field of *Flight Path Wall* is strictly squared at its four corners, though its internal configuration of white lines launches doubts against that strictness. Rectangularity wins out—as usual, it is both the beginning and the end of Quaytman's excursions into sensuousness. The tautly rounded curves of his latest paintings recall the bowed edges of his slab-and-bar works of the late '60s. There's a retrospective spirit to this exhibition. Joined to the new severity of Quaytman's palette, it suggests that his drama has entered a classicizing phase.

—Carter Ratcliff