



Harvey Quaytman, *Second Letter from the Front*, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 80".

Harvey Quaytman

David McKee Gallery

In the '60s, Clement Greenberg and others took turns being Moses come back from the mountain. They revealed to the world what the immutable laws of painting were, and they championed those who adhered to them. There was also the marketplace, where certain artists, many of whose names we hardly remember now, were all the rage. But the center, as Yeats warned, cannot hold. All along, Pop art, Conceptual art, and photography were busy spawning their progeny. Then came the '70s and the '80s, and another generation of truth-mongers began trumpeting this or that, making pronouncements from whatever soapbox they could climb onto. The result: confusion. In the midst of this, Harvey Quaytman's career stands as a paradigm for the Modernist who pursues a particular vision and refuses to follow the changing rules of the game.

Since the late '60s, when he first began exhibiting regularly in New York, Quaytman has been developing a style that corresponds to Constructivism; he is not, however, a purist. His eccentrically shaped paintings suggest an irreverent playfulness, a desire to subvert tradition to the point where he can infuse it with his own vision. At the same time, Quaytman's contribution to the Modernist canon has never been simply a matter of style or material. He has never fetishized his means, or resorted to fashionable existentialist ploys; consequently, he has never become a darling of the media. However, this exhibition was evidence that neither the lack of critical attention nor changing fashion has eroded his faith.

In these recent paintings and drawings Quaytman has abandoned the shaped format, and a hard-edged cruciform is the predominant image. In contrast to many recent artists, the artist has not used this iconic image to evoke a spiritual presence or as a pretext for covering a canvas with paint, but to explore the multiple connotations of a simple geometric form. For example, in *Kachina*, 1985, it refers to the cuneiforms on Hopi Indian ceremonial head-dresses; in other paintings it suggests a monument within a landscape. The highly saturated planes of color, which shift between warm and cool, reflective and absorbent surfaces, have been applied in distinct, matter-of-fact layers. In using a step-by-step, additive process to assemble the cruciform image, the artist has provided the viewer the means to easily disassemble it. We may read the horizon, the presence of the sun, or the emblem of Christ in these geometric images, but these are not the subjects of Quaytman's paintings. One could say that Quaytman is using an iconic image to examine our received patterns of reading and of ascribing meaning.

Quaytman does not take the significance of his images for granted. There is a real sense of something open-ended and exploratory going on, as if he were on the brink of making a major statement. The works in this show are far superior to anything he has done previously.

—JOHN YAU