Neil Anderson: Traveling the Plane

Neil Anderson is a wonderful abstract painter. As such, he is a member of a club. The Club of Abstraction.

But what does that mean? He is part of the great stream of twentieth and twenty first century artists who believed that abstraction, the transformation of the chaos of the visual world into its purest forms is transcendent, spiritual, and the true path that art should take. A hundred years ago it was a political statement to drop narrative, to include the forms of all societies and times, to include those outside and children because the innocent eye was better than those beholding to the patronage of the nobility, churches, and power.

In our present tumultuous age this seems somewhat anachronistic and utopian, out of step with the politics of our vicious era. Now- now- we need the quick fix of sound bites, the immediacy of the internet, an instant tallying of the results. After one caucus an election is settled. Our "artists" practice taxidermy and puppetry, convinced in their economic and aesthetic cynicism that the buyer is a child, easily distracted by the shock of the view.

It doesn't help abstraction that under the rule of Clement Greenberg and the formalists, narrative was forbidden. The visual statement was supposed to stand for itself as an optical truth, as a pure talisman against the kitsch of demagogic and political murals.

Anderson writes in several artist statements that his work does not involve narrative. And yes, it doesn't involve a saga in the literary sense. His paintings are not history paintings and you can't derive a sense of time spinning, events sequencing. And yet, I think there is a narrative that Anderson's work participates in and that is the transgressive story of art history and its place in the lineage of abstraction.

Nearly two decades ago, Anderson used to make more representational works but still with an eye to purity and abstraction even then. His canvases depicted beds of leaves aligned parallel to the picture plane, as if viewed from above. This was the flatbed picture plane. There was no story there, no iconography of leaves. The leaves made patterns and bound by their contours, figure/grounds were defined in a very formal way. He sought the essential forms that were buried in the random collection of gathered material. The leaves gave Anderson a starting point to enter the picture, much as numbers or letters gave Jasper Johns a place to begin. In effect, Anderson was making a stillife of the landscape. He still is, of a sort.

Slowly over the years those leaves coalesced into planes and the ground into a second plane. Planes crashed into patterns, wove a Rorschach textile of complex arrangements so subtle as to almost be a palimpsest. Anderson developed techniques that were only his, blotting and

scraping paint off the canvas to push the lighter residues back into space, working with a variety of copying and projecting means to generate large masses for the grounds. These are his methods alone and I think the fact that he works in relative physical isolation in the woods in central Pennsylvania allows him the privilege and mandate to slow down time and develop at his own speed. He is not beholding to anyone in the woods. He is Emersonian and Thoreau and painter in one.

This is not to say that these works are innocent or naïve. On the contrary, Anderson knows exactly what he is doing. He has shown consistently for over four decades, been shown at MoMA and the Whitney and is in major collections. His isolation is the same as the Abstract Expressionists in the then rural Hamptons, or Brice Marden in Eagle's Mare. Getting away means working at one's own speed, learning from the self.

These new paintings are the brightest and most accomplished in his career. Instead of flatness, the new paintings have developed a typology, a map or maze of paths out of brushstrokes and the path of the hand. They show broken arcs, ovals, or circular motifs like targets that meander, stop and start again. These arcs come and go under and over planes so complex visually that their origins are obscured in "the architecture of surface." There is no beginning, only immanency. On top of this is an overlay with tracks and improvisational strokes branching, like an organic version of *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. These paintings are a dance of chaos and order, dancing, ducking, kept in the air like a supreme juggling act. Their geometry of circles on square supports morphing into rectangles is there but jazzed up by his new palette. Color and form are in a tense balance. And this saturated color darks almost blacks, cranberry, anarchistic oranges, plums is superbly sophisticated. They are both naturalistic and synthetic in equal parts.

You can tell that Anderson is a veteran as you just don't arrive at color like that, touch like that it takes years to understand and perfect and experience art and the process of its making to produce work like this. You can see that he more than a passing knowledge of some major artists: Matisse, Diebenkorn, Marden, and Winters. The paintings acknowledge this lineage, nod and go beyond them. These are not pastiches or derivative. These are arguably the best paintings of Anderson's career; radiant, playful, joyful, serious.

I hope you will spend the time to look at these works. They return you to the woods, the very Eden of the eye. These are very fine works indeed.

- Sid Sachs, Director, Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA, 2008