

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Friday, May 11, 2007

A short course in abstract art

The Locks exhibition has its own definition of post-painterly abstraction.

By Edith Newhall
For The Inquirer

It's clearly a sign of the times that "Post Painterly Abstraction," the title of the current group show at Locks Gallery, could pass for one of those painfully artspeaky contemporary labels for a trend. In fact, Clement Greenberg, the reigning American art critic of the 1950s and 1960s, came up with the term, and it's the one most closely associated with him today.

The former champion of abstract expressionism and its dense, agitated surfaces used it as the title for an exhibition he organized for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1964, of paintings by 31 artists - among them Helen Frankenthaler, Ellsworth Kelly, Morris Louis, Frank Stella, Jules Olitski, Gene Davis, and Kenneth Noland - who favored a new style of openness and linear clarity.

Locks Gallery does not presume to take up where the original left off.

Unlike Greenberg's bold statement of all new work by a cast of mainly male artists born mostly in the 1920s, Locks's much smaller, updated exhibition spans several generations and includes works dating from 1963 to the present. Only one of its artists, Paul Feeley, was in the first PPA. Locks' show is a little like the history lesson by the freewheeling professor who summarily picks his or her own favorites to illustrate a point (although that kind of self-indulgence is actually characteristic of Greenberg's shows, especially the late ones).

Everyone fits in somehow, some way, or else.

The art I would not have expected to see in this show, but which inhabits it with as much presence as any work here, is by Judy Chicago, who is so closely identified with her sprawling, feminist icon The Dinner Party of 1974-1979 it's hard to remember that she did anything else.

But Chicago produced some very minimal geometric work as a member of the "Finish Fetish" movement of the 1960s, like the luscious-looking painting on view here, Pasadena Lifesavers Red Series #3, in acrylic lacquer on acrylic.



Odili Donald Odita's "Weave," acrylic on canvas, at Locks Gallery. The Tyler professor's work will appear at this summer's Venice Biennale.

Locks' ground-floor gallery, where Chicago's work is, lays out the premise of post-painterly abstraction. Feeley's *Untitled* (November 26) from 1963 is the embodiment of Greenberg's observations of the nascent movement, with its curvy lines and open spaces, and was even made in the same year as the three Feeleys in Greenberg's show. Though painted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Edna Andrade's three stripe paintings are the distant cousins of Gene Davis'. A geometric painting by Tyler professor Odili Donald Odita (who's been selected for this summer's Venice Biennale) and three cut-and-dyed velvet pieces by Polly Apfelbaum demonstrate the trajectory and viability of post-painterly abstraction - asserting, in Odita's case, that colorful, hard-edged geometric painting can still tantalize with possibility, and in Apfelbaum's, that all rules, including not painting on velvet, can be broken with exquisite results.

Upstairs, in the second-floor gallery, the show gets a little fast and loose. You can build an argument for the inclusion of paintings by Jennifer Bartlett and David Row, since their paintings certainly deal with openness and linear clarity, but they're not especially new (Bartlett's date from 2000-2001 and Row's from 1995) or relevant in a room of recent works by Apfelbaum, Odita, and Andy Collins that seem to pointedly carry on a dialogue with the original tenets of PPA. Stuart Netsky is also represented by two earlier works, but his painting *Untitled* (2000), in poured oil and latex - which looks like a consciously faux version of a painting by Larry Poons, one of Greenberg's anointed - fits in. It's on clear vinyl, however, not canvas.

And you wonder why post-painterly abstraction sounds so new?

Locks Gallery, 600 Washington Square South, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. 215-629-1000 or www.locksgallery.com.