New Paintings

Essay by David Carrier

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Long ago, long before Clement Greenberg published the now canonical essays collected in his Art and Culture, the main lines of the development of modernist abstraction were discerned by another writer, an Englishman who never saw a non-representational artwork, and took little interest in painting of his own day. In his "The School of Giorgione" (1877), which most astonishingly anticipates Mondrian, Kandinsky and Pollock, Walter Pater writes that "all art constantly strives after" the situation in which "the mere matter of a picture... the actual topography of a landscape... should be nothing without the form, the spirit..." Is it surprising, then that the work of Warren Rohrer, which has a real place in this tradition of modernist abstraction, also has its origin in the landscape? This may be hard initially for the viewer of these, his most recent works, to see. They look, and are, entirely abstract. Two decades ago, his link to the landscape was more apparent. "Rohrer," Anne d'Harnoncourt wrote in 1976, "has always painted the landscape in which he lives." This is no longer true.

Rohrer's 1990s paintings show markings, a kind of calligraphy running back and forth in parallel rows, set on or cut through a field of color, almost monochromatic in the center, with underpaintings appearing at the edges. As with Sam Francis's behind the frame paintings, there is the illusion that the real content of these works lies in an area that we could enter, and see only by walking through the painting. Of course this is only an illusion, but it does, I think, explain the result of focusing on these areas at the margins of our field of vision. "I am trying to get back to an earlier state," he has said. Standing back we see his field of color; coming close, we note these markings. One essential dualism of his art involves the movements necessary to bring together these two elements of his paintings. Speaking recently about his lack of concern for the figure/ground relationship, he observed that if he is trying to get rid of that, it also is something I had to get through." A fascinated observer of the work of Ryman and, earlier on but not I think recently, of Marden, he has wisely kept his distance from the world of the New York School. Since he had, after all, shown in the 1955 Carnegie International and as early as 1959 painted a figurative work much indebted to Turner (who in his MOMA show certainly spoke to American Abstract Expressionists) and Soutine, he was well prepared to go his own way. Certainly, he has been influenced by looking at mainstream American abstraction, but my sense is that his is essentially a self-sufficient development.

Rohrer's last obviously figurative paintings, from 1972, show a deliberate horizon line. "I thought the paintings were about gridded structure. I thought that was what people would see. They didn't see that at all. They saw flowers. I realized I had to explicit about what I was trying to do in my paintings." Much (though not everything) about his art can be understood by grasping this story of how he made his goal visually explicit. In the early paintings, we can make out what is being depicted; but now his works are autonomous. Rohrer perhaps has himself given the best explanation of his development: "I'm increasingly deliberate as I get older." Many artists do evolve in that way, but what his particular deliberateness seems to involve is a withdrawal from explicit acknowledgement of his landscape sources.

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In his part, this deliberate withdrawal is determined by how he chooses to deal with the viewer's expectations. Titles are a real issue for present-day abstract artists. David Reed very rarely uses titles; Sean Scully always does. They are very different abstract painters but they face the same problem. By attributing an explicit expressive 'meaning' to a painting, titles tend too often to suggest that artworks contain hidden images; they threaten, always, to turn abstractions into figurative works. Rohrer's recent painting is, I believe, concerned with blocking any such too explicit associations. His personal way of handling this problem is interesting. Rohrer's double panels are untitled; the single ones have titles. Back and Forth moves the marks back and forth, imitating boustrophedon, the Greek writing technique which moves across the page and back, left to right, then writing right to left. And the diptychs inevitably achieve such a 'doubleness', even without cues about such movements, when we look back and forth, left and right, then doubling back.

In a phrase I admire a lot, Steven Z. Levine writes of "the twin fields of (Rohrer's) art, the planted Lancaster County of his ancestral youth and the painted color fields of his first maturity in abstract art of the 1960s, identifies, I believe, his ultimate attachment to the countryside which originally inspired his art. And his separation from it, for while Rohrer's paintings are often beautiful, neither their colors nor his drawing could be called pretty. "I think the One Two," he said to me, "skirts the issue of being pretty. I hope it escapes being pretty." His colors, poised between attractive natural color and artificial city paint, always are remarkably singular. If he owed something to Bonnard and, in his earlier work, to Milton Avery, to whom he painted a remarkable tribute, ultimately he has become a highly personal colorist. This is why his colors as also his color relationships, always look obviously unnatural.

Does speaking, as I am inclined to do, of his drawn marks as coming to the surface imply that they were always there underneath? In fact, Rohrer embeds his marks into a wet ground, from which they appear to emerge. In the early paintings, these marks depicted; now, become autonomous, they are drawn through from paper. Renaissance artists transferred their designs using cartoons; Rohrer rubs through one part of his images onto the painted surface. Rohrer's drawing is, characteristically, a small gesture. Not graceful, not sweeping, it is a pointilist stroke; a movement smaller than that of the harvesting farmer's scythe, which is graceful, it might be compared with the little chopping gesture made by a worker using a hoe. But while farming is essentially a repetitive activity, a form of manual labor, serious painting, of course, is not. "When I think of it in terms of repeating the thought or even repeating the size, I think of a violation of something. I can't accept a violation of the individuality of the piece." However concerned he is to build upon his earlier achievements, Rohrer never repeats himself. He never returns to the past. I am sure that this is why he, like many artists, finds painting a risky activity. Faith is needed. "Going a certain direction, I won't know until I get there what is to be found."

Too much, perhaps, can too easily be said about Rohrer's relationship with New York abstract painting. More is to be learned, I suspect, by reflecting upon his passionate admiration for Bruegel especially for the great harvest scene in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Its deeply contented landscape, with the resting workers, shows a theme which is close to the heart of Rohrer's own relationship with the land. In response, in large part, to Greenberg's determinedly materialistic account of abstract painting, a lot was said about the potential spiritual qualities of abstract painting. Certainly, Rohrer's devotion to the Pennsylvania countryside he loves, however great the obvious distance of his recent paintings from any definite reference to nature, may show a religious respect for the land. And the creative work needed for crafting these pictures

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has obvious affinities with that labor involved in sacred rituals. But what ultimately strikes me is the autonomy of Rohrer's determinedly soft-spoken works. They open up a space, a place to contemplate, which each of us may choose to inhabit as we see fit. This moral aspect of his art is important.

Breugel's "winter pictures,' Pater's greatest follower, the English art writer Adrian Stokes (1902-1972) wrote, "are always a revelation. He then insists on that reversal of the natural order of things—he who keeps nature ordered by his color...thus he contrives another natural world on the pattern of the old." WInter sometimes appears in Rohrer's abstract paintings as do other seasons; and he too contrives what in his art appears as a natural world patterned on its source, nature. In winter, the distracting greens, which in summer threaten the balance of light in his very high studio, disappear. It must be great to work there on cold days with brilliant reflected white light. "I'm still indebted to the landscape," Rohrer has said. "I'm engaged in a dialogue between what I'm, indebted to and what I'm rejecting." His achievement depends centrally, I am sure, upon his ultimate individuality. Is this now what gives his art its aesthetic value?

The book in which "The School of Giorgione" was republished, Pater's The Renaissance concludes with a beautiful thought: "art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for the moments' sake" Is that not the achievement of Warren Rohrer's paintings? Transforming their landscapy content into autonomous abstract painted surfaces, they focus our attention on the here-and-now, transfiguring his original subjects into these works of art.

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