

Henri Art Magazine

Interview: Michael Zahn

I first encountered Michael Zahn's paintings in a show this past summer entitled "[Late Liberties](#)." It was an exhibition I was very interested in mainly because there seemed to be a renewed interest in abstraction. Many of its works were still dealing with abstraction from a post-structuralist viewpoint which was a bit of a disappointment. However, I had a very different reaction to Michael's painting. As I thought about his work I realized it was pushing around the last 15 years of theoretical abstraction opening a door to a more expansive exploration of what materialist abstract painting might entail. What stuck with me about his work is the light touch and the absurdist sense of humor that played on the surfaces. He is currently having a show of new work at Eleven Rivington, and what follows is an "e-interview with Michael."

Mark: In these new works, you've said you're using naïve set theory to resist any formal organization. As I understand it, this sort of structuring is done so one may group various things together while creating casual connections and contingencies between entities. There is a kind of Duchampian feel to this technique, and I am thinking of 3 Standard Stoppages, where random action determines measurements that are then categorized, grouped and displayed. What criteria were you establishing for your sets? Does randomness play a part in the process?



Michael: Set theory is an expedient metaphor. It offers a way of building an expressive vocabulary where definitions aren't rigorously codified, and terms retain a quality of openness. This expressive quality arises from the proximity of terms to one another. I'm not interested in set theory as an organizing system per se. I'm as influenced by a Bugs Bunny cartoon, or a menu in a terrific restaurant, or the reflected light of the sunset over the roofs outside my apartment. I just want the work to be present, and to be convincing. Those are my criteria, and there are a number of ways of bringing the work about. Duchamp's example is a good one too, as I'm basically looking for means around the

formal orthodoxy that governs abstract painting. Internalizing arbitrariness and postponing judgement are probably the two biggest issues I face when making something.

Mark: I see aspects of your work as both a continuance of and a challenge to the physicality of Minimal painting. I am thinking directly of Frank Stella's black paintings, Donald Judd's boxes, and Brice Marden's diptychs. Though you have adopted the materiality of Minimalism's "surface and side", you also play with the techniques of dematerialization, using the illusions seen in optical electronic structures such as the sizable windows or pixelated images of interactive media.

Michael: I guess the relationship I have to Minimalism contends with its mode of address, and with the scale of things. Last night I was talking with a friend about this idea of making a life-sized maquette of something, which sounds kind of stupid, but I think that's more or less what I do a lot of the time. One of the paintings for the show at Eleven Rivington is called Hang. It's a two-panel painting and is just under seventeen feet long. Its internal division evokes the structure of the gallery's north side, which is all glass and opens to the street. In this sense, the painting resembles a huge window, or a curtain wall. It also shares an affinity with Blinky Palermo's wall painting Fenster I, a transposition of the facade of the Bremerhaven storefront in which it was exhibited. Yet the large scale of Hang, by physically doubling the horizontal expanse of the wall on which it's placed, projects another elevation into the room itself. This second architecture to which the painting refers is the virtual lattice of the graphical user interface. The broken black dashes across the painting's top and the overlapping white panel at its right suggest glitches, images or components that haven't loaded. Technically, a 'hang' occurs when a computer doesn't respond to input from a keyboard or a mouse; if a computer is hung, the user needs to restart the machine to continue. Hang thus acknowledges the alleged failure of heroic abstract painting, while humorously rebooting its program. The modulated tints of Hang, basically variations on red, green, and blue, are then distributed across the three walls of the gallery, creating an immersive, all-around space perceptually networked by these colors. This triad establishes a ground against which the exhibition at Eleven Rivington is figured. I suppose this is what I mean by something being 'life-sized'. It creates conditions that implicate the viewer in its presence.

Mark: I see this as a radical re-imagining of viewer interaction. Unlike Palermo, who stops with the schematics of a double, you dematerialize space through the use of color, and morph it into optical code.

Michael: I'd say scale and color deform things, rather than dematerialize them. The work has a pretty insistent physicality.

Mark: This essentially complicates the conventional notion of the double, or of its representation as well. With Hang, you push the question of the 'real' that's behind these multiple structures. The gallery space becomes an open operating system, or a shell composed of chroma and code.

Michael: The work at Eleven Rivington acknowledges observations made by Daniel Buren in his essay 'The Function of The Studio', and gives some of his points a droll quarter-turn to the left. In certain ways, I've always considered the endgame of abstract painting as a closed system begging to be hacked. But some of the issues you raise are difficult to talk about, as they're related to the Western metaphysics of representation in a pretty profound way. Regardless of what I just said, we're no longer engaging a simple dialectic of presence and absence, since materiality is mediated by these coded structures whose foundation is that of a simulated uniformity constructed out of patterns of information. This relates to what I mentioned previously about internalizing arbitrariness, or filtering randomness and noise. I'm looking for relatively simple expressions that are capable of conveying the maximum amount of information in any given situation, and that compress experience into discrete moments that continually unfold as a continuum. I'm not a programmer, I'm a painter, but I like to think my medium is flexible enough to engage these issues on a number of levels.

Mark: Your work manages to straddle both the corporeal and the ephemeral, and creates a disjuncture around the codes of both painting and computer programming. What structures of abstract painting do you find represented in operating systems and electronic media? How are they different from painting, or is there any difference? How do the virtual and the actual inform one another in your work?



Michael: Desktop iconography in particular aspires to a level of thingness that something like, say, a monochrome aspires to as well. Gaming environments, which are ephemeral, can be intensely visceral. I give a certain thickness and weight to immaterial metaphors by painting them, by making them into actual things. I also want to disturb the totality of the work and make the painting difficult to see, to really, actually see, in a sense. I mean that literally. We might agree that we know what a painting is, or we think we know what a painting is, so I tend to disrupt a unified vision of the painting as an integrated entity. The work is sensed as much as it's seen. The paintings possess haptic qualities that are very subtle and discrete, that don't reproduce in photographs, that resist the tyranny of the jpeg. I've always been drawn to the use of multiple panels, as those formats activate space in very specific ways by making space itself a part of the composition. As an analogue, one of the most interesting things about my laptop is the tricky space that exists between the screen and the keyboard. Sometimes I recognize this space as an incredible complication of the concept of the flatbed plane described by Leo Steinberg, since in this case it's neither vertical or horizontal, neither nature or culture. It's somewhere in between, right? Yet it's one of the sites upon which meaning is constructed, or knowledge is based. Michel Foucault describes something

similar in his reading of the Saussurean algorithm. He refers to the bar separating signifier from signified as a neutral band. I find similarities in this observation to the nebulous space I'm describing that runs through the computer. It's also present in the surface of the painted work, and in the relationship its support has to the wall, or to the space around it. The work is located where phenomenology and semiology intersect.

Mark: Is there a connection between this illusive electronic space and the Baroque space of expansive perception? Personally, I'm thinking of the painting in San Pantalon by Fumiani, where the ceiling explodes, and I do mean explodes, in a teeming vision of heaven. Abstract painter David Reed contends that Baroque painting was bound specifically to architecture. Your approach to space seems different than that of the Baroque artists. You bring the painted codes directly onto the walls, as if the electronic world is wrapping reality in its optics. I imagine someone has clicked on the sizable corner of the operating system and dragged it directly into the room.



Michael: Mark, I think my work is way too primitive to be considered in the same breath as that of the Baroque! If anything, it's closer in spirit to the paintings of Giotto and Mantegna, or even to Cimabue and Duccio. There's an awkward grace to that work that's really mesmerizing, and that I seek to emulate. The painting you saw last summer is a good example. The four panels rest in a shallow space that's similar to the way devotional figures are clustered in a Trecento altarpiece. I mean, the color in that work alone, with its highlight and shadow edges, is little more than a dopey riff on the apostles' robes in a Fra Angelico panel. The Early Renaissance was an incredible period of human invention, yet technically things were a little wonky. I see certain parallels there with the present moment, regardless of how slick or resolved the objects of our daily lives might appear at times.

Mark: I get the wonky visual bit, and that's what I responded to immediately. I see your visual "primitivism" as extremely sophisticated, just as I do with Giotto or Masaccio. The way we visualize, the way we see is always a personal, human thing tied to our fleshy memory. I'm also reminded of that picture of Barnett Newman standing inches from his giant red painting, as he demonstrated the idea that the sublime was connected to both the physicality of the canvas and to the limits of his peripheral vision. Are there elements of the sublime in your ideas of sets, genres, codes, and programs? Is there a utopian

vision similar to the underlying platonic ideas in Minimalism, or the reductive sublime seen in Constructivism?

Michael: I love Newman's writing as much as his art. His description of the Indian burial mounds in Ohio is really radical. I grew up there, and his

words are true: Standing before the mounds, there's nothing to see, and he says so. He's totally present in a specific place created by those walls of earth, and everything else— I forget how he describes it, trees, rivers, nature— is out there where it is. He's here, as he says of what he apprehends. It sounds pretty simple, but the implications of that awareness are huge. I guess it was shortly afterwards that Newman began to understand his work as not being about space, but about time. I think this has less to do with sublimity as he addresses it, which retains the subject, however residual or atomized, at its center, and more with a contemplation of infinity, which exists without one. If I'm able to get even a fraction of that kind of presentness in my work, well . . . That wouldn't be too bad.

for further information about Michael [check out this interview at Minus Space!](#)

Michael Zahn ...As Michael Zahn is currently showing at [Eleven Rivington](#) May 29- July 3. The opening is May 29 from 6-8 pm.

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