

ARTFORUM

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Pat Steir
CHEIM AND REID

Pat Steir is a prolific painter who remains capable of surprising us with innovative variations on a particular combination of iconography and technique that has been a feature of her work for some time: cascades of liquid—presumably water—rendered by alternating a gradual buildup of paint with more gestural marks and splashes of color. In her recent exhibition at Cheim and Read, Steir showed monumental canvases in

which she successfully reconciled a series of dichotomies: complexity and simplicity; dynamism and sensitivity; discipline and chaos.

The most consistent group of works in the show was a set of works—Whistleresque symphonies, really—in black and white, gray and silver. Each of these paintings exhibits varying degrees of sheen and opacity, achieved via successive additions and subtractions of color. The backgrounds confront one another like standards on a battlefield, sometimes clashing and throwing off sparks. Occasionally, when two different colors are superimposed or mixed, one consumes the other, tames it, or cancels it out in a sort of painterly hand-to-hand combat. In some cases black is poured onto black, silver onto white, and the result is a pulsating gradation of translucency on a surface that initially appears monochrome, but is in fact highly articulated. The images of waterfalls in these paintings appear at close range; dense, impassable walls of water that loom, roaring, from the darkness. Sometimes a reversal is effected, and we feel as though we are inside the waterfall looking out.

The show did feature some exceptions to this format—paintings in a quite different, more naturalistic mode distinguished by radiant pinks, greens, and golds. In *Pink* (all works 2007), for example, a lush salmon color, applied to a moss-green ground, forms a welter of translucent rivulets that thicken at the center of the panel to evoke a verdant rain forest.

Sunspots II is an outpouring of rich gold that slides over an emerald-green ground, as dazzling yet harmonious as the sun refracted in an eddy of water.

Steir's work can appear self-contained, but it does engage in a dialogue with that of other artists—both historical figures and contemporary ones. Perhaps the principal compositional references for the black-and-white paintings are Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*, 1958–66, and Mark Rothko's works with black and gray backgrounds from 1969 and 1970; Steir is similarly intent on defining the psychological space of mortality. A parallel dialogue with the painting of Sol LeWitt and Robert Ryman attests to both her affirmation and her abandonment of rationality.

Ultimately, however, Steir's preferred workmate is chance, an active element that also connects her to Eastern thought and to the oeuvres of John Cage and others. She relinquishes control over the pictorial events that occur on the surface of her works, making conscious decisions only about initial parameters of medium and technique: the fluidity of the paint, the choice of medium in which the pigment is mixed, and the placement of the poured paint. Once paint hits canvas, gravity takes over and Steir need only await the result, realizing an engaging Taoist paradox: less painter, more painting.

—Ida Panicelli

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

Pat Steir, *About the Black I*, 2007, oil on canvas, 10' 7 1/2" x 9' 1 3/4".

