Black and White in Color

by Lyle Rexer

Talk about asking for trouble. In the New York art world of the late 1970s, it was getting to be a bad idea to pick the wrong heroes. Pop had pretty much dismantled the grand ambitions of two generations of abstract painters, reduced the quest for “reality” to a yearning for fame, if you believed Warhol – or even if you didn’t. Chuck Close once remarked that when he was introduced to de Kooning, it was nice to meet someone who had painted more de Koonings than he had.

So maybe we never really needed the idea – the grand illusion – that painting and consciousness were cognate, and that to push into ever more extreme, immediate, spontaneous and unfamiliar territory was to uncover strata of the psyche that had never been so directly represented: the studio as (allusive metaphor coming up here) the Heart of Darkness. Maybe – as feminist artists began to assert – all that messy, semi-suicidal heroism was really more like two guys in a bar telling each other things that dames just couldn’t understand no matter how many Scotches they tossed back.

But what if it was all just about painting? What if you looked at those works by Pollock, de Kooning, Gorky, Gottlieb, and Louis and saw not metaphysical anguish and gauche displays of antiquated sentiment, much less a ticket to the men’s locker room, but rather visual freedom, unthinkable artistic permission, roads yet to be taken? How could you not walk down them, just as painters had been doing since the Renaissance? Even if you were a woman and would have to put up with the charges of penis envy, trying on men’s clothes, etc.

By now, we can see all that Melissa Meyer saw; how she begged, borrowed and stole everything she could until, like Gorky or Picasso, she made them her own: the way a line can move through fields of color to tell a different kind of story about the self, and how color itself – diaphanous, as David Cohen calls it – can take on the momentum of a line, looping, bunching, flowing, leading to luminous entanglements. We want to say that this is the way painters really live – among the surface traces, textures, and materials of others, making decisions determined by no other motive than what they see and need.

And yet, in spite of the possibilities of a palette open to her, in spite of the risk and freedom sanctioned by past masters (let’s not be afraid of the word) through battles long since waged and won, it was not enough. There were intuitions unpursued in what she had seen. There was, for instance, the graphic, surrealist Pollock and the calligraphist

Pollock; the residual Cubist de Kooning of Excavation (1950), and the gridded, ritualized energy of Gottlieb's pictographs. Outside of America, where no one was looking, there was the Matisse-meets-Keith Haring approach of Carla Accardi. What they all had in common in these works was an underlying desire to measure the necessity of form by restricting their visual language. To Meyer, these restrictions may have suggested the benefits of an alter ego, and for a decade between 1984 and 1994 she carried on a double life, developing her public language of color and line by day and a more private black and white meditation by night.

It was almost literally that way, the split between public and private. As the artist remarked recently, "After working in watercolor or oil, at the end I would do something in black and white, to check the tonality and activity of the forms, to see if they had strength." This is not drawing, exactly, but something more investigative and critical, enacted with an entirely different set of materials – primarily charcoal and oilstick – a kind of gestural x-ray. Over time, the skeleton bones took on a life of their own. The black and white decade came to constitute a second career.

A longer essay could detail the many ways in which the color and black and white works nourished and complicated each other over these ten years. I am intrigued by the fact that the decade is bracketed by two visits to Yaddo, the artists' colony, with the latter visit, in 1994 being decisive for Meyer's embrace of watercolor although she began working in the medium earlier during a residency in Switzerland. Immersion is maybe the better word. In the black and white decade, it seems that initial (and perhaps more modest) issues of density, transparency, and gesture yield in the late 1980s to those of organization, figure and ground, and finally movement itself. The Hauteville Series of 1993, the only set of pencil drawings in the exhibition, suggests nothing less than an attempt to reconstitute her own paintings using only a single moving point. At the risk of pushing this intuition too far, the series seems to me one of the most insightful attempts by a painter to understand the nature of her art – or rather, it is a demonstration of that understanding at a pivotal moment.

Nevertheless, it is with the early black and whites that we feel closest to the artist herself – to her questions, discoveries, and enthusiasms. The two untitled works from 1984 show Meyer getting in touch with her feminine side; or at least that would be a conventional reading of the sweeping, rounded forms, with all their biological, vegetative, and sexual suggestiveness. That energy gets released in the thick, swirling Vorticist explosion of Untitled #8 (1985). You wonder what the critics would have said about her indebtedness to male antecedents had they seen these.

After this piece, Meyer seems free to examine the debris. Untitled October #3, Untitled October #5 (both 1985) and several related gestural drawings from 1986 are not so much images as collections of questions and answers about what kind of marks can be made and what they might look like in relation to each other. Wide, flat pathways of oilstick are intersected by thin, squiggly traces of velocity. The geometric and the organic test each other like partners about to sign a prenup. And maybe there's a bit of a Halloween dance, with darkness and laughter, nonchalance and focus. There is, also, a feeling for structure and organization, but nothing like the diptychs and triptychs that come later, in which structure subsumes gesture.

No, here we can see – we can feel – the marks being made, the paper engaged, the crayons wearing down, the fingers getting dirty. Here is the painter's version of what Luc Sante called "the factory of facts," an autobiography of acts that constitutes the only self-knowledge an artist really needs.

Meyer made some attempts to scale up her experiments into full-fledged paintings, but the black and white decade ended (more or less) with that visit to Yaddo. I think I know why. It was at Yaddo that the night world and the day world came together, and the oppositions that seemed so fertile collapsed in a new and comprehensive knowledge of how to proceed. With the exception of Accardi and possibly de Kooning, depending on your point of view, most of the (male) artists who influenced Meyer did their best work in a relatively short time. The futures were behind them after a preliminary period and then little more than a decade of major discoveries. For Meyer, the black and white decade and the paintings of that time were a jumping off point, a prologue. And the best (we know now) was yet to come.

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