

Gallery Going, by DAVID COHEN

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"Melissa Meyer" at Elizabeth Harris Gallery, 529 West 20th Street, New York (between 10th and 11th Avenues 212 463 9666) through November 8

"Andrea Belag: New Paintings" and "White: A Group Show", curated by Andrea Belag, at Bill Maynes Gallery, 529 West 20th Street, New York (between 10th and 11th Avenues, 212 741 3318) through November 15

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Melissa Meyer **Blue Horizon** 2003
oil on canvas, 22 x 22 inches
Cover, November 6, 2003: **By Myself** 2003
oil on canvas, 22 x 22 inches
Courtesy Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York

The latest show of Melissa Meyer at Elizabeth Harris represents one of America's leading painters at the very top of her form. As a lyrical abstractionist the only artists to approach her in verve and inventiveness that I'm aware of are Brice Marden and Howard Hodgkin.

If this statement seems hyperbolic, first ask the question, who actually is painting lyrical abstraction these days? Thomas Nozkowski and Sean Scully are leaders in the reinvention of abstraction, but neither can really be called lyricists (the one because of his problematics, the other his operatics). The colorful doodles of Jonathan Lasker and the muddy doodles of Terry Winters are too mired in postmodern posture to be taken seriously as ends in themselves, which is arguably a prerequisite for genuine painterly lyricism.

Historically, it is extraordinary how few painters really took up the challenge of Jackson Pollock. His rival for leadership of the New York School, Willem de Kooning, had countless imitators and acolytes, and to this day some kind of fusion of abstraction and figuration remains the most compelling option for most painters still drawn to modernism. Pollock's influence, however, was in a way more radical: his gestural abstraction propelled artists away from painting, towards performance and new media.

Most Second Generation New York School painters chased the dragon of color in the direction of field over and above line. In the short term, this led to intense chromatic explorations; in the long term, however, flat, hard-edges drew painting into iconic, conceptual avenues. Or else protagonists like Jules Olitski or Helen Frankenthaler withdrew into romantic pictorialism.

It is a calligraphic melding of line and color that truly conveys the lyrical impulse. Ms. Meyer's painting entails an almost alchemical marriage of figure and ground; more specifically, in her case, of gesture and bleed. Her work of the last twenty years reconnects with an earlier impulse in American painting. One forebear she brings to mind in her fusion of line and space is Sam Francis. Like this overlooked postwar master, she is an epicurean rather than a hedonist: *jouissance* and agility are never gratuitous ends in themselves.

At first it might seem business as usual with Ms. Meyer's newest show of nine canvases, with the familiar vocabulary of diaphanous stains and bravura flourishes. But actually there's been an exponential leap in the development of her syntax. Earlier in her career, Ms Meyer reinvented herself as an oil painter when she discovered watercolor. There is no mistaking the influence of this medium to this day, in the speed, spontaneity, and ethereality of her paint handling. As profound a shake-up has recently occurred in her very public education as an artist, but this time there is no visual clue as to the protagonist: Photoshop.

Last winter, two mammoth murals as much as forty foot high and sixty wide were unveiled in the atrium of Tokyo's tallest building, the Shiodome City Center. Preparing maquettes for this project on a computer renewed her engagement with collage. This, not to mention actually executing the murals, has profoundly affected her sense of space and her attraction to radical discontinuity.

The grid has for long been a mainstay of Ms. Meyer's sense of composition, and paintings can still resemble happy go lucky quilts. But there is a new looseness, a liberal improvisation with structure, evident in works like the 10-foot-wide diptych, "Duetto," (2003). This is an exhilarating duet between open and closed forms, between lasso-like calligraphy, and dense, blob like hieroglyphs. Shaped blocks of smooth color form a kind of basso continuo.

Such musical analogies come felicitously when looking at Ms. Meyer. She has a rare capacity to be at once harmonious and performative, in that everything is exactly and inevitably where it should be, and yet is full of surprise.

Photoshop and the Tokyo murals have been for Ms. Meyer what cutout and the Vence Chapel commission were for Matisse: a surprising new twist in the education of an artist "ever a beginner" in the Rilkean sense.



Andrea Belag **Sevilla** 2003
 oil on canvas, 36 x 30 inches
 cover, November 6, 2003: **Ghost**, 2003
 oil on canvas, 36 x 30 inches
 Courtesy Bill Maynes Gallery

Andrea Belag has developed a highly personal painting idiom that has something of the formal capacity of a sonnet in its discipline, severity, and expressive potential. She is showing at Bill Maynes, two floors up from Elizabeth Harris. Her work is charged with an intensity that suggests the kind of expansive imagination that thrives within reduced means.

A typical work is usually around 3 feet on its longest side, constructed of rectangles within rectangles, brushy bars of muted color. Her format very closely resembles that of Mr. Hodgkin in the way it rather literally presents an Albertian window onto the world. Like the Englishman, she seems to encourage subtle intimations of landscape and narrative. She shares with Ms. Meyera watercolor senseibility within oil paint, and with Mr. Scully a willingness to make emphatic brushstrokes lead players in her painterly dramas, at once literal and metaphorical presences.

Her paintings have a voice of their own, however, and a welcome voice it is, tough and quirky. In terms of color, she is more tonal than chromatic, and she has a correspondingly prodigious range of textures, from the loose, open, and squiggy to the grainy, gritty, and dense. At times these can seem solipsistic, a little too pleased with their own range, but the contrastive character of her brushstroke-bars often carry the narrative. And her work always remains charged with an ³as if² quality. Her ambiguous forms nervously teeter on the edge of cognition. They can be correspondingly edgy in mood.

In Mr. Maynes's project room, Ms. Belag has curated 'White,' a cute thematic show which in its studied eclecticism seems calculated to distance the artist's own formal preoccupations

from any accusation of formalism. A number of conceptual exhibits just happen to be white; there's a rather fascinating Dorothea Rockburne on plain paper (but does that really count as white?), and a politically heavy-handed white panel by the new *enfant terrible* of racial abjection, William Pope L. The show badly needed a Robert Ryman, but the wayward effort was nonetheless redeemed by the inclusion of an utterly exquisite window painting by Lois Dodd from 1983. The compelling focus and intensity of this realist painting raised the bar for Ms. Belag's own efforts.

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