



Andrea Belag, *Blade*, 1991, oil on canvas, 26 by 24 inches. Richard Anderson.

Andrea Belag

RICHARD ANDERSON

Andrea Belag's elegant new paintings develop a tension between spontaneity and method. Central to each is a gestural image of one or more cattails—thin reeds painted with a few deliberate brushstrokes and set against backgrounds that are often dark but always luminous. Their layers of translucent pigment, applied in loose, broad swirls, suggest a watery habitat and also the surface of an old mirror, mysterious and deeply reflective.

That the backgrounds are not as simple as they first appear is borne out on closer observation, as one notes the regular impressions made by sheets of paper that Belag presses against the surface when it is still wet. These leave ridges in the paint, enhancing its tactile effect and extending the role of the hand; they imply a rectilinear structure and lend the surface substance, as though it were a masonry wall. They also distance the paintings from their most obvious reference, Monet's waterlilies, and suggest links to more contemporary influences.

Belag's translucent, undulating brushstrokes, within their implied grid, seem indebted to David Reed. Yet where Reed is

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drawn to Baroque drama, Belag, like Monet, appeals to Japan. Her rich backgrounds recall the high decorative effect and craftsmanship of Japanese screens. The cattails also recall oriental calligraphy, yet their deliberate, almost clumsy execution betrays a very Western stance of self-assertion and anxiety, which is reinforced by the somewhat obsessive application of the backgrounds. Belag thus touches a note of personal poignancy that is new in her work. —Hearne Pardee