

ARTFORUM

SEPTEMBER 1994



Andrea Belag, *Stairs*, 1994, oil on canvas, 78 x 66".

ANDREA BELAG

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FINE ARTS

Broad horizontal stripes, alternately light and dark and predominantly in blue, earth tones, and white, dominate most of Andrea Belag's recent paintings. The colors seem to have been imprinted in thin, variable layers on the canvas rather than painted on directly. Though, admittedly, the surfaces of Belag's paintings may recall faded jeans, in strictly artistic terms they bring to mind the sobriety and reflective self-effacement associated with a tradition that stretches from the late work of Cézanne to the early work of Brice Marden—work in which the space of naturalistic perception is crossed with a direct experience of the painting as physical object.

Placed within these fields of stripes are dark, irregularly oblong shapes that might be any number of things but that finally demand to be seen as battered shoes. So these are not exactly abstract stripe paintings; they are also depictions of abandoned shoes on stone stairways. We needn't ask to whom these shoes belong; they too immediately recall (though with welcome reticence) the mass tragedies of our century. Though these are no more specifically the shoes of those gassed at Nazi death camps than the stairs need be those of the Odessa steps in Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, 1925, the pathos of a shoe separated from its wearer is akin to that of a body separated from the life that animated it. In the history of paint-

ing, these shoes inevitably echo those of van Gogh, to which the words of Martin Heidegger—"In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth"—have attached themselves, however ironic the citation of a philosopher who did not resist the lure of Nazi ideology may seem in this context.

These paintings embody a tension that might be described as one between abstraction and representation, between formalism and Expressionism, between the heritage of Cézanne and the heritage of van Gogh. This tension is uneasily maintained and the balance is clearly askew in the one painting here that departs from the formula. Perhaps the conjunction Belag has engineered can never be sustained more than momentarily, and yet what gives the paintings their power is that, internally, they assert stasis, or rather ceaseless metastasis, a condition that lends them a sense of monumental inevitability. It's a trick, really: as you begin scanning the image, you naturally look from the top stripe and work down; but as you reach the bottom, you are led to see the bottom stripe of the canvas as the step corresponding to where you are standing, and then it appears as though you are looking down the flight of stairs with the lowest step corresponding to the painting's top stripe. There is no stable top or bottom to the painting, thanks to this dialectic between the orientation of the image and that of the painting-as-object. It is as though one were caught in a perpetual loop or Möbius strip, always returning to the same moment of tragedy.

—Barry Schwabsky