

Claire Seidl has come into her own artistic identity, an achievement comparable to finding one's "voice" as a poet or a jazz musician. Such a maturation often entails both a reconciliation with and a freshening of tradition. The tradition with which Seidl finds herself holding a dialogue is that of gestural abstraction, an arena so outside the prevailing art "discourse" that it is at first difficult to believe that any painter in her or his right mind would attempt to enter it. Of course, anything that is "out" in the art world is probably already overdue for a revival; a permanent condition that is not entirely due to the urge for novelty and the need for turnover in a laissez-faire cultural marketplace. Self-disciplined artists such as Seidl can successfully mine the veins of discarded styles and doctrines precisely because they are working away from the distractions of more topical pressures. These artists provide evidence that, in fact, such modes of expression have been discarded prematurely in the face of Modernism's implacable requirements of innovation and self-revision.

The once dominant gestural abstraction of the late fifties and early sixties was enfeebled by an increasing formalization—an encoding of materials, processes, and even gesture itself. Seidl restores a sense of unexpectedness and play. Her work has moved back and forth between emphasizing linear or planar structures but her signature gesture has emerged as a snappy, band-like stroke that can outline flat areas of color or pile up into an area itself in boxy, loosely shifting grid formations. This is one of the ways in which Seidl keeps things open. The shifts in facture describe shifts in associative emphasis between landscape and figuration, just as shifts in the palette of each painting will suggest either interior or exterior and day or night. The stacking of cubist volumes in the center of Don't Even Think About It, for instance, projects a much different spatial feeling and sense of pictorial occasion than the airy, attenuated linear structures and daylight colors of True North and Hopscotch.

The quirks and surprises of association, in fact, seem to be what Seidl's work is all about. Even the changing velocities of brushwork are loaded with sensation enough to excite memories of a place and moment that aren't necessarily connected to a specific image. The bounding diagonal rhythms playing across Boat Ride certainly evoke the experience implied by the title. Seidl isn't an impressionist, however. The painting called Boat Ride exists as an autonomous event, an occasion unto itself. The title becomes funny because it is generated by the artist's own surprise at recognizing a dormant memory in the movement of the paint across a rectangular flat surface. An unlocking of the mind takes place comparable to that generated by Surrealist automatism. And, of course, it is merely an example of a host of recognitions waiting in the same painting. If Seidl thinks "boat ride" what might you find?

Like all good painting, Seidl's images hold a flat surface together in a compelling manner. Look at the teetering balance of the large blocks of color perched on the little sled-like green linear passage on the bottom left of Boat Ride. What makes Seidl special is the specificity of her formalism (each painting is an unusually distinct entity for its belonging to a contemporaneous body of work by one artist) and the range of her associativeness—a range that expands beyond memories of the objective world to include our sense of style and history. At a given moment one might see any aspect of twentieth century painting in her pictures. These glimpses of the visual record of Modern painting are not employed as pastiche, but instead constitute the inevitable surfacing of traits and sources in a broadly inclusive, complex art.

Stephen Westfall  
New York City  
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