

ONE AND ONE: A STUDY OF SCALE

Linguistically, scale is an adjective that describes something that is larger or smaller, based on a fixed ratio of the measurement to which it relates. The idea of an exhibition of paintings, of one large painting and of one small painting by the same artist, is quite valid in terms of an historic and ongoing interest in the question of what exactly determines "bigness" and "smallness" in a work of art. If the necessary ingredient in a work of art is the amount of thoughtfulness, skill, or soul that an artist manages to translate into the nonverbal form, then a small work should essentially contain that matrix in as similar a ratio as any larger work by the same artist (and vice versa where these essences are lacking). We have all been moved by viewing works of art that none of us felt to be small at the time, and yet which were physically not large—such is the nature of impact. Matisse said that the main difference between a large painting and a small painting was, for him, "a matter of confidence," I would agree that the criterion remains the same.

Stephen Rosenberg has curated a smart exhibition for his gallery that is well-balanced and unusually optimistic (I personally congratulate Mr. Rosenberg on his choosing to represent here, and in the gallery in general, a high ratio of good women artists). It seems daring these days to present a group of mainstream abstract painters, and though this group is by no means homogeneous in their varied approaches to painting, they share a healthy and intelligent attitude in going about the business of making paintings. All five painters are abstract, and formalist in the sense that the quality of their work is not particularly tinged with sociological concerns.

The first work in the show as one enters is the large-scale contribution by painter Stephen Zaima, and it is *Untitled* (1986) with three broadly colored areas in black, light blue, and yellow. I felt the large work by Zaima to be less effective than the smaller work, though both have an energetic underpainting, with Zaima imposing geometric shapes over the initially gestural field. Whereas Hoffman was able to stop the action by the imposition of such similar geometric forms but still keep the action going, Zaima seems to bog down and fuss over these shapes, sometimes

alluding to volume. The same motif, of triangle become cone, is in the small work by Zaima, also *Untitled* where he moves from painting on linen to painting on a glass plate glued to the same surface. The strongest sensibility in both the large and small painting is Zaima's ability to draw. His singular delight in doing so appears on the many layers of the object's painted surface.

Claire Seidl's painting *Long Division* (1986), which is 80 x 60 inches and painted in oil, is a lyrical and direct painting. Seidl is fascinated by the organic; she explores, as if by braille, the nuances of shift within natural forms much as the dunes of a desert might shift with the wind. Seidl's surfaces are rich and lavishly crusty, with a confidence in color that is truly merited. *Untitled* (1986) by Susanna Tanger, is an 80 x 84 inch oil painting with graphite and pastel that is a magnificent Madonna Blue field. Tanger moves the paint over the surface of the canvas and partly obliterates an implied underimage. What Tanger involves us with here is seeing a process from which she has eliminated the

nonessential from her work; a reductivism that is open enough to allow us to peek into the act of decision making. Tanger's successful small painting is only 12 x 24 inches, with a final coat of gray that is stunning. In this small-scale work Tanger, like Zaima, has evinced a greater depth as if the stereopticon view were more central to how they conceive their art.

Martha Keller's abstract painting, *Luna di Miele* (1986) is 84 x 60 inches and has a sensuous surface of oil and wax on canvas. Keller's two paintings in the exhibit are formal in the dual usage of that word: there reigns a sobriety and calm over her work that is due to the serenity of the surface. Keller's paintings seem bigger than they actually are because of their ability to assert themselves into the space via a unified surface quality that creates an effect of enormous space. Keller tends to divide her field into three areas of coloration, both in *Luna di Miele*, and in Keller's small painting, yet she manages to imbue each area with equal weight and volume.

Keller and Willis make the slowest paintings in this group. Keller's paintings are simple at

first, and then initiate a closer examination of their sheer elegance. Thornton Willis, in his large painting, *Lattice III* (1986), is 78 x 58 inches and epitomizes the carpet paradigm, making new use of the stripe that dominated his work in 1969. One senses that Thornton Willis has thought about, and discarded any idea of shaping the canvas, or beefing up the surface, choosing to continue his exploration of pure painting. Willis's earlier *Lattice Series* is represented at Rosenberg with a small painting from 1979 called *Study #1*, which plays with interlocking form and field within an open grid-work of striped bands. The bands of primary colors are further broken down where they meet, creating edges and intervals that aesthetically jolt the viewer, especially where they continue on in an altered color. The strangely resonant green field in *Lattice III* appears to be the result of these colored intervals. Willis's paintings effect the use of the stripe in a literal manner, with a literal intent to produce a painting without additives.

One and One; A Study of Scale succeeds in proving its own assumption that where so much can be expressed, size has nothing to do with it. (Stephen Rosenberg, December 3-January 3)

Vered Lieb

Claire Seidl *Long Division* Oil on canvas 80 x 60" 1986

