

ALEX COUWENBERG: ZEN AND THE ART OF IM-PERFECTION

By Peter Frank
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Supposedly devolved into its own conventions, abstract painting was dismissed almost half a century ago as irrelevant and decorative. But in fact, the modernist allegiance to visual language freed of conventional syntax, self-sustaining and evolving, threads its way unbroken between abstract expressionism and today, eclipsed but never eliminated by the subject-, motif- and medium-driven concerns of post-modernism. And now, however timely its appearance may be, a new generation of painters is emerging that seems more than superficially dedicated to the exploration of non-objective composition on a two-dimensional plane.

Such “neo-modern” abstraction manifests with particular conviction in southern California – perhaps because such idealism (and idealism *about* idealism) flourishes best at a remove from primary commercial centers and/or in primary intellectual centers. (The Los Angeles area may have burgeoned as a gallery locus and home to mega-collectors, but it remains the largest concentration of art schools and art departments in the country.) As well, abstract form has always been regarded by southern Californians as, at worst, an armature available to those who would explore concept or perception – and at best a higher, even transcendent, experience in and of itself, a potentially meditative, decidedly reflective

approach to the distinctive regional abundance of, yes, light and space. “Hard-edge” painting, after all, began in Los Angeles.

Actually, it began in Claremont, east of L.A. proper, in the cluster of colleges that have anchored academic discourse in the “southland” for over a century. Alex Couwenberg was raised in this part of Los Angeles County and went to school in the Claremont Colleges. With many of his classmates, he was encouraged to paint abstractly all the way through his studies – not forced, not urged, but simply encouraged, and given the technical tools and the historical exposure to evolve his own approach to formulating and distributing abstract forms across a plane. The poise and elegance of Couwenberg’s style, which would engender suspicion in a New York context, is seen as second nature – and “good chops” – in California, a natural byproduct of the “finish/fetish” trajectory that began in the military fabrication shops of World War II and took root in the region’s postwar surf and car cultures. Couwenberg, an accomplished surfer, grew up familiar with the designs and glossy finishes given surfboards, fiberglass or otherwise.

The reliance on line as a critical component of image, the exploration of color – especially close-hued colors placed near one another – and the meticulous, just barely articulated surface all bespeak Couwenberg’s comfort with the language of abstraction, especially one derived from the techniques and materials of the late-industrial (and, for that matter, early-digital) era. For him, non-objective painting is a commitment, but not an ideological stake, as it would have to be back east. Rather, it is an expression of sensibility formed by time and place, an exploitation, and finally reflection, of sensory input – input that includes the manual as well as the visual, the practical as well as the theoretical. Handicraft is not the subject of Couwenberg’s work, perception is. But handicraft is the experiential armature on which he has structured his perceptual arrangements; it is the characteristic that distinguishes his art as a product of a distinctive southern California art, and social, history.

Couwenberg’s painting is more than a mere souvenir of the “southland,” however. In its rhythms, its interplay of line and mass, its subtle illusions, and its engagement of a palette that seems to find an exact, knowing midpoint between the “good taste” of interior decoration and the raw taste of (outdoor) sport design, Couwenberg’s art is impelled by a highly tempered intuition and subtle wit. His approach is gently self-aware, slightly satiric but not

mocking, and indulgent of its sources while rigorous in their translation to abstraction.

Couwenberg distills his life and times into these paintings, as if they were diary pages recording his retinal and tactile observations and reflections. There isn’t the same one-to-one relationship of seen shape to rendered shape, environmental color to painted color that one witnesses in, say, Ellsworth Kelly’s work. Rather, like John McLaughlin’s meditations on the real, Couwenberg’s paintings make use of everything seen every day in the construction of a less cacophonous and dispersed reality. Couwenberg does not aspire to McLaughlin’s purity, but that contemplative state operates at the heart of the young painter’s approach to reality.

Finally, Alex Couwenberg seeks to calm the tumult of life without losing the vibrancy of that tumult. The sense of exquisite balance that shivers through his work comes from Couwenberg’s search for that exact midpoint between the mundane and the transcendent, the sensuous and the disembodied. Hitting that midpoint exactly is itself a zendo exercise, and may rarely be achieved; but in their ready appeal, graceful and antic, Couwenberg’s paintings – rather like those Indian weavings with deliberate flaws -- make an art of missing perfection by a hair.

Peter Frank is an art historian and art critic who lives and works in Los Angeles, California. He earned his B.A. and M.A. in art history at Columbia University. He was art critic of New York’s Soho Weekly News and later served as chief art critic of The Village Voice. He is currently the art critic for the L.A. Weekly. This essay is one in a series of introductions to the gallery’s exhibitions written by fellow gallery artists and friends.