

Barbara Rose. "Abstract Illusionism." *Artforum*, October 1967, pp. 33-37.

Perhaps the most striking feature about the recent work of several leading abstract painters is what appears to be a return to illusionism. Accomplished through a variety of illusionistic devices including the use of two-point perspective, orthographic drawing, and warm-cool color contrast, a new type of illusionism may well be the single common denominator linking the most advanced painting being done today. It has been obvious, for the past year at least [1967] that a shift in focus from the flatness of the picture support which characterized the abstraction of the early sixties in favor of the acknowledgment of the inescapable illusionism of pictorial space is taking place. But the teleology and goal of this development remain to be analyzed.

In his essay *Modernist Painting*, Clement Greenberg observed: "Flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else." The question that must be answered, in the light of recent developments, is how a return to illusionism—if it can be characterized as a return—can be reconciled with the notion of the preservation of the integrity of the picture plane that critics since Fry have considered the sine-qua-non of a successful painting.

Since modern painters established the authority of the picture plane as an uninterrupted surface not to be violated, it might seem that any kind of illusion would be bound to disrupt this unity by "cutting holes" in the painting. Yet Greenberg has shown how modernist painters were able to employ light and shade, the means of traditional sculptural illusionism, without invoking an illusion of the third dimension, by stylize them into flat patterns.¹ This solution sufficed for Cubist and Cubist-derived paintings. The type of chromatic abstraction developed by Rothko and Newman, however, eschewed both patterning and value contrast, and relied almost exclusively on color and light to create a resonant atmospheric space. And now, the recent work of Ron Davis, Darby Bannard, Frank Stella, and Jules Olitski, among others, establishes a kind of space that depends neither on the flat patterning of light and dark characteristic of decorative art nor on the superimposed veils of color of atmospheric space. Although the space of their recent work must be described as illusionist—that is, not flat like the space of decorative art—it nevertheless does not contradict the actual flatness of the support upon which it is realized, which might seem a paradox. The point of the following discussion is to investigate the manner in which this seeming paradox has been resolved.

Some viewers have been puzzled by the oddness of certain aspects of new work by the four artists I have cited. I would like to suggest that what has been seen as odd or puzzling has been made so intentionally, and furthermore that the curiosities of space and surface remarked on by critics have all had the common aim of reconciling abstractness with illusionism. In my view, these negative judgments arise out of a misunderstanding of the artist's intention, which in each of these cases is the establishment of the artificiality and hence the abstractness of pictorial space. This artificiality is established mainly in two ways: one dependent on the identification of the physical character of the surface, and the other on the contradictoriness of the visual information supplied. Once the conventionality of this space has been accepted, the artist is permitted new freedom to vary the contents of that space in ways that might otherwise seem to defy flatness, had the purely conceptual, artificial nature of the imagined space not been initially defined as the context in which the illusion takes place.

1. Surface and Illusion

The four artists I am primarily discussing are united in their use of surface as an identifying and locating factor in its relationship to space. For example, Ron Davis uses a glossy, polished surface both to establish the picture plane and to identify the picture space as artificial. His use of surface is easiest to discuss because it is clearest, since he works with a new material (fiberglass) in order to produce a surface that is literally artificial. Looking at a Davis, we begin by knowing that the hard, reflective surfaces of his fiberglass paintings are artificial by identification. In this light, we can see Davis's use of metal-flaking and marbleizing as added insurance that the medium is clearly identifiable as plastic. This identification is essential because there is no confusing the space of nature with the space of fiberglass. Because the paintings are obviously, in fact blatantly, made of plastic, Davis is able to construct within them an illusionistic space that never risks being interpreted as actual (except in photographic reproduction where the character of the surface is not clear). The moment we know that we are looking at plastic, we know we are not looking at a space in which a landscape, a figure, a still life, or for that matter any actual object, could exist.

Davis's paintings are superior to work that merely takes advantage of the technical properties or effects of new materials because the issue that they are made of plastic is not peripheral or after the fact: that the paintings are made of plastic is central, even crucial, to the definition of a highly developed illusionistic space as not literal or actual but entirely abstract and imagined. As

in Davis's work, in the recent work of Bannard, Stella and Olitski, explicitness of surface deliberately limits the type of illusionism possible to an entirely abstract, conceptual and anti-naturalistic one; and the emphasis on surface serves not only to identify but also to locate the plane of the picture.⁴

Bannard and Stella hold opposing attitudes toward color and structure, but their attitudes toward space and surface are related. I will discuss their spatial concepts later; at this point I wish merely to compare their use of two different types of surface—matte and glossy—within a single painting, and to speculate on the consequences of employing such a combination. Bannard has been mixing contrasting surfaces for several years now; Stella's alternation of a relatively soft, absorbent surface with a hard, reflective enamel surface was new in the shaped paintings exhibited last year at the Castelli Gallery and on the West Coast.⁵ Bannard has achieved this variation of surface by varnishing certain sections of the painting, whereas Stella has accomplished it through alternating different types of pigment—epoxy resin, fluorescent alkyd and metallic acrylic—within a given painting. To my knowledge their work is unique in persistently and deliberately combining two types of surface within the same painting. It differs from previous attempts to vary the surface of a painting such as, for example, Braque's sand paintings and the various types of matter paintings derived from them, in that only the reflective quality, but not the texture of the surface, is altered. Because the texture is uniform, there is no question but that one is dealing with a single continuous plane. In the various types of matter paintings, on the other hand, texture as well as surface is altered. Because texture is not an element in their work, Bannard's and Stella's alternation of matte and glossy passages remains an entirely optical phenomenon, in the first place because it is concerned exclusively with the light-reflecting property of the surface and not with its texture; and secondly, because it does not involve any kind of foreign matter, either mixed into the pigment or applied on top of it. In this way it introduces a new variable into abstract painting without violating any of its canons; and the introduction of such new variables is at present the central task before painting, if it is to retain its liveliness and viability and not become the superannuated convention its detractors would make it out to be.

Olitski's treatment of surface is unlike that of Bannard and Stella, although he has the similar end of reconciling illusionism with flatness by means of a highly individualized surface which calls immediate attention to itself.⁶ Olitski uses a uniform surface, but one that is broken up into minute particles of paint, suggesting a kind of atomic pointillism. Olitski's paintings bear other parallels with the way in which Seurat played off horizontal and vertical accents within his paintings against an artificial internal frame.⁷ Most of all, Olitski's newest

paintings seem to me to bear the same relationship to the atmospheric space of Rothko's and Newman's paintings that Seurat's art bore to that of the Impressionists. The reason that Seurat appears to mark such an advance over the Impressionists in the direction of abstraction is the same reason that Olitski's space appears more abstract and less atmospheric than that of the older generation of color painters: in both instances the artificiality and conventionality of pictorial space has been emphasized at the sacrifice of naturalness. In comparison with the atmospheric space of the art that preceded theirs, both Olitski's and Seurat's paintings appear relatively dense and airless. In keeping with this observation I often found the best paintings in Olitski's stunning Corcoran retrospective to be those sprayed so heavily as to make the surface coats of paint separate and reveal the layers beneath. Especially effective I thought were the paintings in which metallic pigment was used. Both the density of paint and the reflectiveness of the metallic passages served to articulate and to locate the surface in an unmistakable way. For this reason the loading and caking of paint into a hard surface went considerably beyond the stained surface Olitski inherited from Louis and Noland which characterized his previous work. In many ways, the heavily sprayed paintings are a throwback or rather a modernization of Olitski's own early matter paintings; and they carry the authority of the discovery made on one's own.

The degree of illusionism in Olitski's recent paintings is always relative; the paint is clearly piled on top of the surface, a fact which, once we recognize it, constantly calls our attention back to the actual flatness of the picture plane. In the new paintings, there are no longer any possible analogies with such ephemeral natural phenomena as sky or clouds or sunlight.⁸ Space, light and color no longer bring to mind the allusions to nature one still senses behind older color painting which often relate it not only formally but also expressively to Impressionism. In Olitski's latest work these elements have become autonomous and abstract; they are used to create a conceptual illusionism without precedent except in the mind of the painter.

2. Illusion and Information

As we have seen, Olitski keeps his paintings flat largely through his insistence on the materiality of his surface. The type of illusionism in which Olitski's paintings participate is related to the use of aerial perspective in older art; it is created entirely through contrasts of light and color. On the other hand, younger artists who continue to depict shapes (which Olitski has discarded in favor of color volumes) often employ variants of linear perspective in combination with an articulated surface in order to create a new type of complex illusionism.^{6a} The most important aspect of these illusions is that they

must be mutually contradictory in order to be successful—that is, they must cancel each other out in such a way as to render themselves unconvincing, another notion that might seem paradoxical until we examine it further.

When these contradictory illusions are added to the contrast between the different types of surface just remarked on, a dizzying arbitrariness often appears to be the result. My own impression on first viewing Bannard's last show at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery was that the paintings were an unmitigated failure because certain areas appeared to detach themselves, coming forward in a manner unacceptable to the eye trained to look for a continuous surface in abstract painting. The more I thought about them, however, the clearer it became that the paintings were so tightly structured that the centers or wedges of color had to be read in two ways simultaneously: both as discrete shapes in themselves and as part of the whole segment of an implied circle cutting into the canvas field, to which they also belonged. Because each shape lay on an arc—plotted apparently off the corners of the painting—that was continuous, it had to be read not only by itself but also as a segment of a greater whole. In other words, the eye could not pick out a discrete shape without being made aware at the same time that this shape was part of one or more larger segments of a circle. The information that a red shape projected discontinuously beyond a blue shape adjacent to it was contradicted by the information that it lay on the same arc with and was part of the same segment of the same circle as the blue shape. In this way, flatness was not denied but reinforced.

The same is true of the information offered by the space of Davis's and Stella's recent paintings. In both cases, this information is contradictory. In Davis's case, we finally realize, after many futile attempts to fit together the information we are receiving in a logical way, that there is no angle of vision that would allow us to see the views constructed in the paintings. Stella's recent works, on the other hand, give us to understand that the relationship of the depicted shapes to the over-all shape of the perimeter is such that a single edge serves a dual purpose, functioning both as perimeter of the support and edge of an interior shape. Since we know that the support is flat, this relationship serves to constantly negate the wildest illusions set up by mitered edges and high color contrast.

In these instances it is necessary that the illusions in the paintings appear mutually contradictory, because as long as it receives contradictory information, the mind understands that it is dealing, not with actual space, but with a purely artificial, imagined space. Irrationality, or seeming irrationality, paradoxically becomes the agent or rather the evidence of a rational conception rather than the mark of a failed illusionism, which it is only when judged by the canons of

representational painting, where it would mean attempted but not mastered perspective. In the sense then that it never fools the eye, the new illusionism is the very opposite of any kind of trompe l'oeil, which means to deceive one about the real nature of texture or space. On the contrary, the new illusionism makes every effort to insure that the mind grasps at once that there is no space behind the plane of the picture; that is, that the space created on the picture surface is a purely imaginative projection bearing no relation whatsoever to reality.

One common type of contradictory information present in recent painting is that of the reversible illusion. By reversible illusion, I mean a spatial construction that appears at one moment to project outward and at the next to cleave inward. Two painters, whose shows were among the best held last year in New York, who have made excellent use of such reversible illusions are Larry Zox and Miriam Schapiro. Zox's last series of paintings, which employ such illusions, seem to me a decided step forward from his earlier abstractions, in which flatness had become a limitation. Because of the active nature of the modified illusionism employed in them, the new paintings have a snap and vigor one found lacking in the preceding series. Zox's career is an interesting one, in that it corresponds to the general direction of abstraction in the sixties. In order to cleanse his work of any vestigial Abstract Expressionist elements, Zox, like Davis, Bannard and Stella, was forced to work backwards in the direction of a minimal or reductive solution. Now, free of such elements, he is able, like Olitski, to retrieve the energy and individuality of his earlier work. In the future, one hopes to see from him an even greater capacity to restore that energy to a purer abstract context.

Miss Schapiro is surely one of the most capable painters currently on the scene, and that her show last year at the Emmerich Gallery did not receive more attention than it did is just one more indication of how out of joint that scene is. Although it was possible in the past to appreciate her considerable gifts as a technician, her latest work makes it clear that only now has Miss Schapiro found herself as a painter. Her paintings are different from the abstract work I have discussed in that they have the imagistic overtones of a quasi-Surrealist architectural fantasy. But the type of space they employ is similar because it takes advantage of reversible illusions—in Miss Schapiro's case, illusions of a highly complex and sophisticated variety—in order to establish the purely imaginary and artificial nature of pictorial space.

At this point it should be made clear that the reversibility of the illusions in advanced abstract art that I am discussing has nothing in common with the reversibility of figure-ground relationships in older abstract art, which have their point of origin mainly in Matisse's cut-outs.⁹ The new illusionism should be seen,

I think, as the principal exit from the cul-de-sac of minimalism and reductionist tendencies, of which the monochrome canvas is the most obvious example. Reductiveness in this light can now be seen for what it is: a transitional step in the history of art, one necessary in order for abstract painting to gain new freedom for the play of the conceptual imagination.

1. "Byzantine parallels," Art and Culture, Boston, 1961.
2. Greenberg has described the effect of their painting (op. cit.) as follows: "This new kind of modernist painting, like Byzantine gold and glass mosaic, comes forward to fill the space between itself and the spectator with its radiance."
3. These are some characteristic responses: Those who have seen only reproductions of his work often believe that Ron Davis's paintings are three-dimensional constructions; the textured surfaces of Olitski's densely sprayed paintings have been described as resembling plastic leatherette; the centers of Darby Bannard's paintings have appeared to detach themselves and "pop out" in front of the paintings in an alarming and unfamiliar way; and the space of Frank Stella's last series of shaped paintings has struck many as arbitrary, inconsistent and capricious.
4. To an extent, of course, all pictorial space is artificial; but it is nevertheless undeniable that there are certain kinds of space we can imaginatively project ourselves into and other kinds into which we cannot project ourselves. The illusionistic space I am discussing is the most extreme example of the second type yet formulated.
5. The hardness of a surface that is literally resistant underlines our awareness of the fact that we cannot project ourselves into the space described on it in a more persuasive way than the soft, yielding surface of stained painting. Moreover, in Olitski's case especially, the harshness and grating quality of the surface works to counteract the sometimes ingratiating sweetness of his color.
6. Greenberg was the first to realize that it was Olitski's surface that allowed him to reconcile illusion with flatness. About the grainy surface of the spray paintings Greenberg wrote: "Together with color, it contrives an illusion of depth that somehow extrudes all suggestions of depth back to the picture's surface; it is as if that surface, in all its literalness, were enlarged to contain a world of color and light differentiations impossible to flatness but which yet manage not to violate flatness." (Catalog of the United States exhibition, 1966 Venice Biennale.)
- 6a. As opposed to Louis's stained veils, Olitski's sprayed layers suggest slabs or slices of color of actual thickness, an illusion once more contradicted by the obviousness of where the surface lies.

7. Seurat's stippling of the frame extended the picture surface beyond its ordinary limits and demonstrated, again quite literally, the artificiality of the space depicted within the canvas itself.

8. Another factor which prevents any kind of identification with natural phenomena is the artificiality of Olitski's palette. Once again, the use of metallic pigments helps to insure this artificiality. It is worth remarking as well that Davis, Bannard, and Stella are equally devoted to palettes that flaunt their artificiality; Davis specializing in "plastic" colors, Bannard in pastel decorator or cosmetic colors, and Stella in a gamut we normally associate with industrial color. It is as if at this point not only the space, but the color associated with nature may compromise a hard abstract art with aspects of the representational.

9. The reversibility of figure-ground relationships provides virtually the whole kick of so-called "psychedelic art" and of the weak, decorative paintings which gave rise to it, such as those of Bob Stanley, et. al. The absolute poverty of invention of psychedelic art, with its appropriation of the principle of all-over composition toward the end of a total environment has at last produced Harold Rosenberg's "apocalyptic wallpaper." And it has made clearer than ever the distinction between apocalyptic wallpaper and Pollock's paintings.