

January 6, 2003

## Laurie Fendrich May Be Harbinger Of New Movement

by Hilton Kramer

In the big, open, immaculately white exhibition space of the North Gallery at Gary Snyder Fine Art, in the nether reaches of Chelsea, the paintings of Laurie Fendrich may, at first glance, strike the visitor as an eccentric variety of geometrical abstraction. Myriad miniature squares and slender rectangles of unexpected color cavort at odd angles with more boldly colored segments of circular forms that may (or may not) allude to figures or machines or Pop imagery. Geometry has clearly surrendered some of its discipline to a more animated, more worldly impulse. These are modestly scaled easel pictures, 30 by 27 inches, yet every element of their complex composition seems to be in orbit as their highly colored forms bow, embrace, separate and all but dance a jig to a melody of their own.

From a distance, the pictures have a hard-edged look; upon closer examination, the edges turn out to be softer and more delicate than we expect, and are usually outlined with a halo of still another

color to mark a transition and illuminate another current of feeling. Is there also an undercurrent of humor in the sometimes carnival exuberance of these paintings? One almost hesitates to suggest the presence of a comic impulse in paintings so seriously engaged in the aesthetics of abstraction. But the fact is that Ms. Fendrich's pictures do, at times, bring out a smile when we look at them—a smile of pleasure and release. At the very least, this is abstraction devoid of solemnity, dogmatism and existential angst.

It's also devoid of utopian aspiration. This is another of the things that separate Ms. Fendrich's paintings from the Constructivist tradition of geometrical abstraction with which they otherwise have so many aesthetic affinities: They embrace rather than reject the world they inhabit. As Karen Wilkin shrewdly observes in her essay for the exhibition's catalog: "Pop culture echoes begin to declare themselves, without obscuring Fendrich's allegiance to high modernism. A strange, latent anthropomorphism

begins to animate her severe geometric shapes. Occasional ovals and curves acquire enormous importance, suggesting schematic references to the body. But it's fleeting. The pictures settle into abstractness again..."

All of this suggests to me that we may be in the presence of a development that doesn't yet have a name. Call it, if you like, post-Minimalist abstraction. Whatever we call it, it's likely to have as one of its defining characteristics a determination to renegotiate the symbiotic relationship that once crucially obtained between abstraction and representation in modernist painting.

In the heyday of Minimalist orthodoxy in the 1960's and 70's, this was an all-but-forbidden subject. Minimalism was absolutist in its program and ideology; Frank Stella had declared war on "drawing with a brush." Sol LeWitt, having failed to create anything of artistic distinction as a representational painter, turned painting itself into a Tom Sawyer decorative project that employed teams of anonymous hands to produce a kind of bureaucratic abstraction on a gigantic scale. But it was the most radical of the Minimalists-Donald Judd, another failed painter-who went further than anyone else, consigning not just European modernism but the entire tradition of Western

painting to the ash heap of history as he embarked upon a utopian project in the closest thing to "nowhere" he could find on the North American continent: Marfa, Texas. ("Nowhere" is, of course, what the word utopia means.) It was in Marfa-where he bought up most of the available real estate, including a bank and an abandoned army base, all of which he turned into a Minimalist compound-that Judd achieved his ultimate goal of removing himself and his work from the contamination of what he called "the salient and most objectionable relics of European art." (There's apparently no danger of such contamination in Marfa.)

We are clearly in a very different period today, and Ms. Fendrich's engaging exhibition is by no means the only sign of the changes that are occurring. Some of the absolutes that governed Minimalism-and, for that matter, some that were advanced by the more doctrinaire champions of Abstract Expressionism-are no longer as persuasive or as intimidating as they once were. "Late Cubism," for instance, is not now the negative critical epithet it used to be. We are all pluralists today, and what looks more and more to be a rejection of sectarian aesthetics is also altering our views on some of the earlier developments in American abstract and abstract-related art that were unjustly

marginalized when first Abstract Expressionism, and then Minimalism and Pop Art, captured the limelight.

Accompanying the Laurie Fendrich exhibition at Gary Snyder Fine Art, for example, there's another show, *New York Abstraction 1930-1945*, that's likely to be a pleasant surprise for visitors unfamiliar with the works on view, especially the paintings by Carl Holty and Charles Shaw. There was a superb painting by Shaw, *Kite Abstraction* (1942), in a splendid recent show at the Richard York Gallery called "*Great Planes*": *Planar Surfaces in American Cubism and Abstraction*, and Shaw is also one of the featured painters in the upcoming exhibi-

tion at N.Y.U.'s Grey Art Gallery, *The Park Avenue Cubists: The Work of Gallatin, Morris, Frelinghuysen and Shaw* (to be shown from Jan. 14 to March 29). Upcoming as well is what promises to be a comprehensive survey of the history of abstraction, *Seeing Red: An International Exhibition of Nonobjective Painting*, at the Hunter College Art Galleries from Jan. 30 to May 3. For aficionados of abstract art, it looks as if 2003 will be a year for the revisionists.

Meanwhile, *Laurie Fendrich: Recent Paintings* remains on view at the Gary Snyder Fine Art gallery, 601 West 29th Street at 11th Avenue, through Jan. 25.