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FEMININE PAINTING?

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Painting and Its Others

In the Realm of the Feminine

Shirley Kaneda

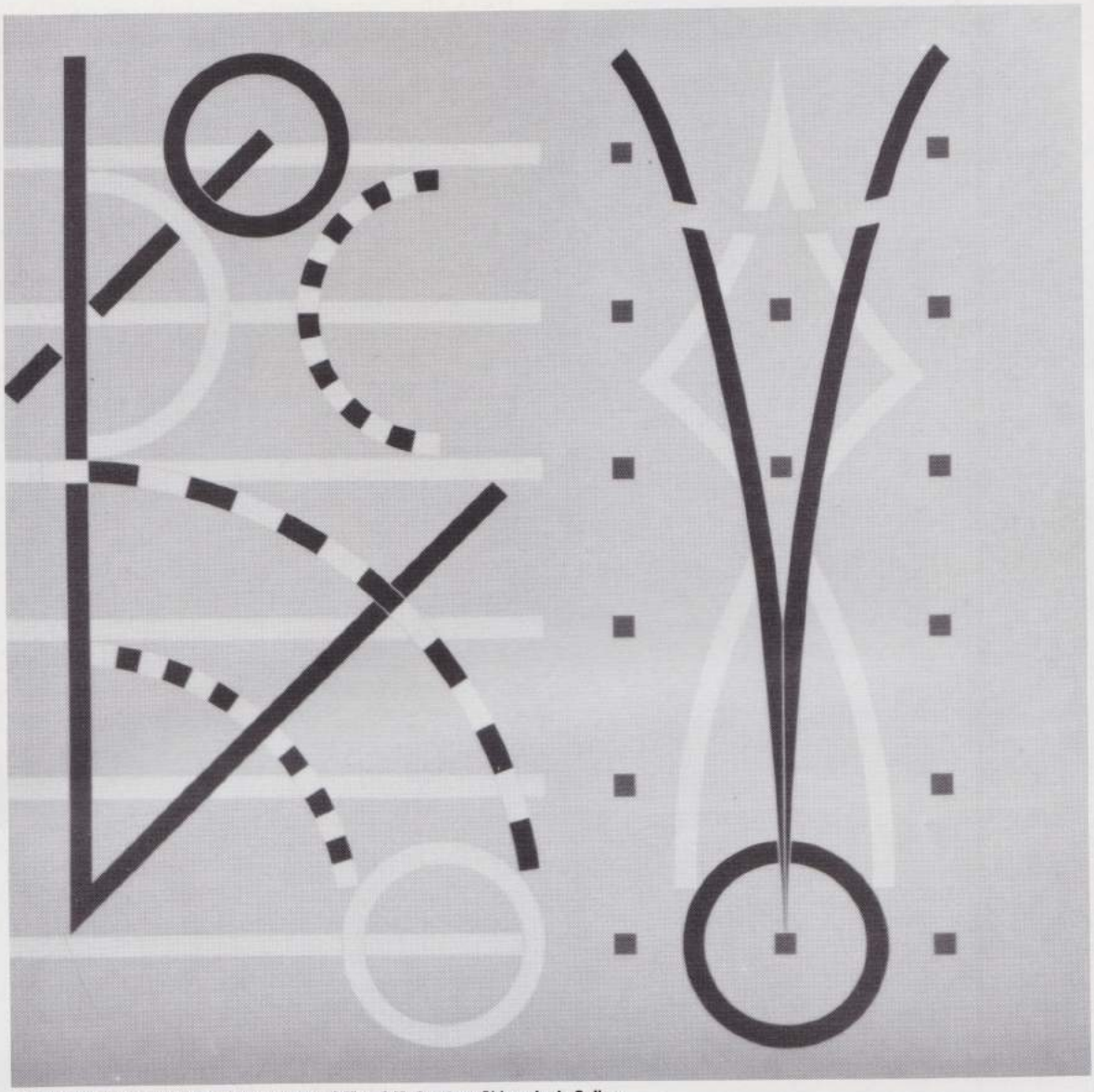
It has been exactly 20 years since the publication of the controversial article, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" by Linda Nochlin, which concludes by stating: "Disadvantage may indeed be an excuse; it is not, however, an intellectual position. Rather, using as a vantage point their situation as underdogs in the realm of grandeur, and outsiders in that of ideology, women can reveal institutional and intellectual weaknesses in general, and, at the same time that they destroy false consciousness, take part in the creation of institutions in which clear thought—and true greatness—are challenges open to anyone, man or woman, courageous enough to take the necessary risk, the leap into the unknown."[1] That women artists, particularly painters, have not been recognized as having achieved as much as their male counterparts, remains a complex and sensitive issue, and has not been resolved in the intervening period. Although I have the utmost respect for Nochlin's insight, intelligence, and courage, the question is no longer one of the role of the "disadvantaged." Instead, the intellectual positions and practices of exclusion need to be illuminated. At the present time, these structures must be reconsidered within the more basic questions of gender's representation.

The proposition of a "feminine" painting that disregards the gender of the maker is, I hope, a more stimulating proposition, for it necessitates a different set of criteria by which one chooses to make and view painting. The present situation in its ambivalence opens the way to a reordering of priorities. Poststructuralism has brought out the multiplicity of criteria for any given text. When one eliminates the notion of a decisive reading, the notion of closure and dominance comes to an end. By their very exclusion, those who are disenfranchised or repressed (women, gays, racial minorities) are in the best possible position to define "otherness" for our culture. This means submitting to a discourse of "difference" in which how something is put forward is more important than the gender or race of who puts it forward; how it is stated (the means) will determine the conditions by which it will be received and judged.[2] To do so, we must disregard the notion of any inflexible paradigm of quality capable of excluding other standards. All the more so when it is abstract painting that is in question, this being the most resistant and decisive discourse within modernism. Modernism is a dialogue of objects, not producers, and its normative voice has drowned out the feminine. Now that voice has become hoarse and academic in its insistent repetition of its master narrative. In order to discover what is retrievable from the abstract project, we must subject it to an interrogation that is neither submissive nor cynical.

Theoretically, the paradigms of modernist abstract painting are ones that anyone could partake of: individualism, self-consciousness, empiricism, rationality, self-reflection, a utopian or idealized notion of progress. The only problem was that these universalist ideals veiled the masculinist particularity of the conventions and institutions within which these ideas were posited as the norm. At this juncture in history, however, there is no reason to presume that a feminine norm for abstract painting should not be established. This does not concentrate on the gender of the maker, but on gender values that prevail in the works themselves. This leaves it to us to determine what constitutes these feminine paradigms whose values are equally worth aspiring to. I would like to start by stating that the criteria for a "feminine" abstract painting has nothing to do with producing feminist abstractions of vaginal imagery as in the work of Hannah Wilke or Judy Chicago, or the craft approach of such artists as Faith Ringgold or Joyce Kozloff.

"Masculine" modernism has failed to achieve its desired effect of universal emancipation through self-consciousness. The consequence of this failure for abstract painting has been a loss of a sense of purposefulness, an inability to structure syntax and to order events substantially. The very notion that avant-garde painting (male) can still be challenging in itself no longer holds the center stage. The "masculine" position is based on the presupposition that there is a finality to all that can be said. Logic, aggressiveness, confrontation, toughness, became the preeminent value terms.

The truth of modernism was, in fact, located in the dismantling of its own assumptions, and in doing so its authority,



Valerie Jaudon, *Chief*, 1990, Oil on canvas, 94" × 94". Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery.

comprising masculine criteria, has come into dispute. Naturally, this has opened up the question of the authority of those values that modernism marginalized, and the possibility that their reassertion can revitalize abstract painting. The possibility of a singular "other," rather than an endless array of "others," is itself a masculine notion, for its logic is contingent on a totalization that itself is now being challenged by the specificity of the feminine.[3] One may have to speak of painting and its "others" and modernist painting and its "others." Any notion of singularity can be considered phallocentric. The "I" is a male "I" because it claims an authoritarian position from which all other positions are to be defined. If we can divest ourselves of this belief we will not be able to speak of painting, but only paintings. This opens the way for these "others" to assert themselves rather than being defined by default. Otherness is not the last refuge of everything excluded by the masculine point of view, but constitutes values whose desirability is denied at the present time.

We must ask how these exclusions, point for point, match up, challenge, affirm, or become corollaries to what constitutes the masculine paradigm and how their presence demystifies so-called masculine painting or affirms it. What needs to be stressed is the notion of "difference" as a perpetual challenge to the fixing of individual and collective identities.[4] In this case the difference of gender in abstract painting serves not only a critical purpose, but a constructive one. The first thing is to reject the way the question has been framed, by asking it in less biased terms. What we have inherited are the rhetorical questions: "Is abstract painting the domain of men or can women make significant and substantial abstract paintings?" If one accepts the question in this form, we are also accepting a point of view that determines a defensive answer. What has been marginalized, suppressed, or excluded from (our culture's) painting's discourse are the issues of "difference" that we must acknowledge.

The biggest fear that seems to arise when one begins to talk

Philip Taaffe, *Nefta*, 1990, Mixed media on linen, 60" × 48". Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

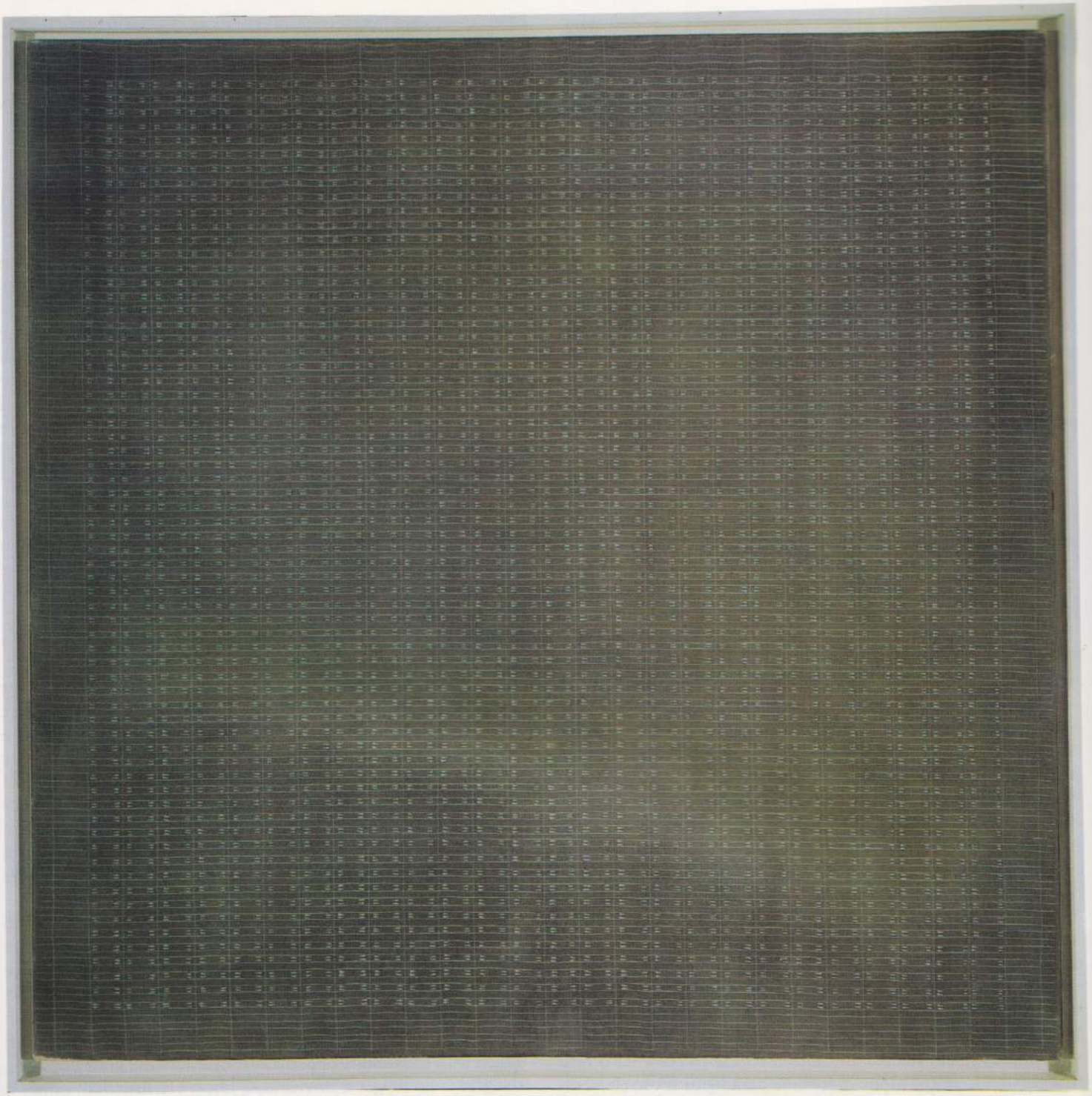
of equality based on difference, is that it will abolish all criteria. But when we talk of addressing the "differences" of characteristics and references, the problem of how to approach them critically becomes crucial. If there is no singular way to judge, it becomes clear that there are numerous ways to approach a particular problem, opening areas of integration closed off by the anteriority of the masculine paradigm. These dialogues are not premised on a notion that the "feminine" paradigm is now to be the dominant one or that the masculine must be subordinated; instead they are to be equal to one another, within a context in which equality is based on a recognition of "differences."

The "masculine" view arises from the notion that we are all doomed from a procedural and logical perspective, that the highest standard of being is the tragic and that the deepest feelings one can have are those of despair (the sublime) and alienation. The masculine response to that despair is conceptual, as if "knowing" or explaining it improved the situation. A "feminine" view is no more or less optimistic than the masculine, but the response to this tragic despair is from a sensuous perspective. It is just as romantic a viewpoint, for this sensuousness supplies no more chance of escape than the conceptual, and is just as desperate. The difference is that it also recognizes the sublimity of a world of pleasures. The perfect examples of this difference are Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, both of whom addressed the sublime, one in a "masculine" way and the other in a "feminine." While Newman addresses it from a purely intellectual perspective and Rothko from a "romantic" one, both came to similar conclusions based on the identical premise that there is no escape and that existence is impenetrable—for Rothko, existence was ephemeral, for Newman it was hard and opaque, but for both, painting was a heroic struggle against these horrors.

With Newman and Rothko, we have the "masculine/feminine" of painting, in which both positions are equally successful in relationship to the necessity of articulating the abstract horrors of existence. That one chooses to objectify it (masculine) and the other chooses to be engulfed by it (feminine) only goes to affirm the tragedy. Here are the masculine and feminine heroic positions, for if we all have to face death, then the challenge is not one of knowing, but of dignity and resolve. It is in this context that Ad Reinhardt (the Black Monk) can be added to the list of "feminine" painters, for he enters into an endless list of denials to arrive at his blackness and androgyny of concept and sensuousness. His gender ambivalence is portrayed as an alternation between hard geometry and fluid spaces. Reinhardt for a time tried to veil the horror of unknowing with soft, white brushstrokes or bright hard color. Eventually his solution was to make the horror of emptiness simultaneous with presence in order to make it ontologically nonexistent, fixed but in flux.

The sense of incompleteness is a feminine trait. More orthodox feminists will argue that such a view reinforces the concept that all women suffer from "penis envy," that women are incomplete because we lack the phallus. As Jacques Lacan points out, the phallus is only a signifier of power in the linguistic sense of the term, it is not the penis.[5] Rather than think in Freudian terms, a sense of incompleteness is feminine because, as women, we lack the power to assert. It is not a question of authority that may or may not make the feminine closer to the reality of the poststructuralist world, but the surrender of the ideal that assertion is heroic.[6] The possibility is that one can articulate a notion that is either incomplete or never conclusive, because it is tentative and propositional, which does not mean it is false.

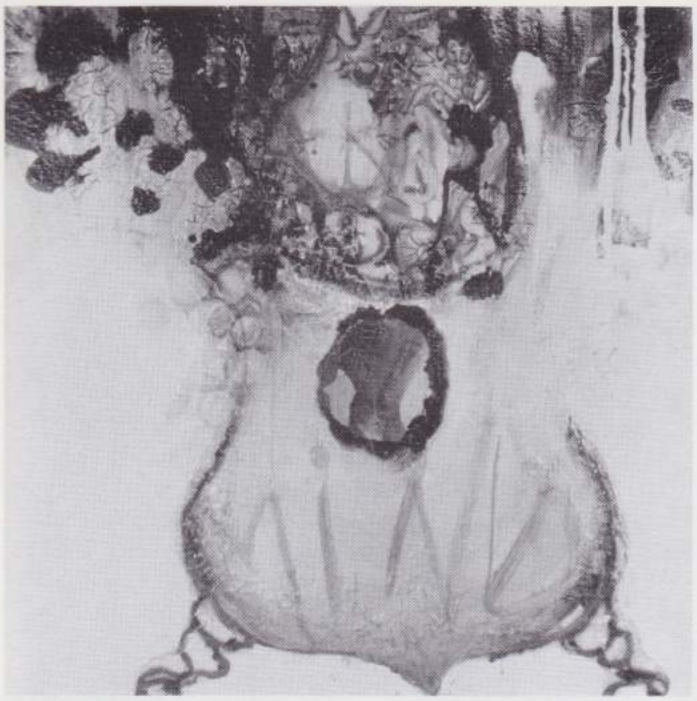
Confusion arises when the heroic struggle is defined by resistance rather than embrace. For example, Agnes Martin, in her earlier paintings, placed hundreds of little dots into a grid pattern, calling attention to their individuality. The lack of uniformity of the dots announces the instability of the grid to mask these differences; the grid becomes the site of indeterminacy rather than control. Martin's works are called poetic, implying that her work was formally weaker than those, for example, of Frank Stella, because they relied on touch and sensibility. Stella's work was absolute, impersonal, and technically objective. To see Martin's paintings as "poetic" is a mistake; she is no less rigorous than other formalists. It is not a question of decorative or nondecorative, it is a question of the personal and impersonal, stable and unstable, passive and aggressive, conceptual and intuitive. "Rigorousness" is not hinged to aggressiveness, and Martin's rigor does not manifest itself as objective or stable form, but through seduction. The only reason Martin is not given the stature of her male counterparts is because of the stigma attached to the idea of the passively poetic. Any signs of non-masculine strategies have been regarded as derogatory, even if the maker is male. This is why Ralph Humphrey's late paintings have been viewed as weak; his use of lighter, softer, and somewhat more "lyrical" colors



Agnes Martin, *White Flower*, 1960, Oil on canvas. 72″ × 72″. Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery.

confronted brooding dark blues and acidy greens that had previously given his paintings a "toughness." For nothing else had changed in Humphrey's additive approach to painting; he had never been involved in conceptually stripping down painting, but in seeing how much one could load up a painting. This loading up meant confronting taste and the expectations inherent in the masculine model. For him, painting was a confrontation with doubt, not the means to stylistic refinement.

Painters of the "feminine" have no choice but to work within the masculine tradition, but they do not have to reaffirm it. The more the "feminine" is disparaged, and the more it is denied, the more the issues such artists represent become apparent and prominent. As Nochlin pointed out, such delineations "destroy false consciousness" and promote clear thinking. Even such criticisms as craftlessness or arbitrariness often attributed to the feminine imply that the standards for skill and discipline are



Suzanne McClelland, *Never Mind*, 1990, Acrylic, clay, oil on canvas, 48" × 48". Courtesy the artist.

based on objective values rather than socially and historically determined ones. One has to remember that not only are the issues masculine, but so are the models for the craft by which they are realized. The introduction of something questionable in terms of craft or the denial of some aspect of it is a form of feminine resistance. Since feminine painting is propositional rather than assertive, it questions the motive and intent of the making; for rather than being authoritarian, it wishes to establish the criteria by which to judge the painting before you, rather than all paintings. By these standards a bad painting is one that adheres to criteria that it cannot fulfill or that are not of its making. A successful painting convinces us that this painting is what it wants to be. It confirms these criteria by clearly demonstrating that it is what the artist has chosen to paint consciously and significantly, and its appearance is not one of default, but of criticality.

"Feminine" painting has always been contrary, eccentric, and unprincipled, structurally and in regard to color. It is now the fashion to adapt to the masculine paradigms those elements long disenfranchised by it, replacing the engaged with a distanced, standoffish approach meant to mediate the inclusion of these elements. The result has been a mannered, classicized, anti-heroic, historicized painting of polished surfaces and desensitized touch that recedes from authenticity and authority. The inclusion of the feminine as a strategy is a way to include the contradictory logic of the sensuous and the rational. The resulting paintings seem uncomfortable with the arbitrary, matter-of-fact, take-it-or-leave-it attitude that has long been embraced by the feminine, whereas the "masculine" consistently attempts to be resolute, idealizing linearity and closure.

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The clearest manifestation of the "feminine" at work is seen in the works of Mary Heilmann or Philip Taaffe. Taaffe addresses the stereotypical feminist area of "pattern and decoration," while Heilmann engages that bastion of male art, the geometric. They can both be seen as opening up an area of painting that, for all intents and purposes, artists such as Peter Halley and Sherrie Levine, working from a masculine point of view, want to bring to the logical conclusion of reproducible substitutes. Heilmann and Taaffe reveal the arbitrariness and illogic of closure by consistently challenging the claimed ground of truth from a position planted in the discarded and dismissed. Halley and Levine are cynical in their commitment to a paradigm they readily acknowledge as oppressive; Taaffe and Heilmann give us instead a model of freedom based on transgression. One can also add Jonathan Lasker to this list. His sense of color, touch, and taste, and his meandering, non-directional lines organized into rigid formalist compositions can almost be called "passive."

We know that attributes such as passive and intuitive have long been associated with the feminine, but why accept these traditional stereotypical characteristics as weaker or inferior? Are they not really corollaries and complementaries of the masculine? It is the "other," that which balances. One might almost say that presently, the most interesting male painters are those who play on the edge of a male/female "hermaphroditic" painting in which they play consciously or unconsciously with masculine/feminine traits—of desire (feminine) and satisfaction (masculine) that are juxtaposed against one another.

The grid, that symbol of control and uniformity, seems to be a prime target for feminine painters. There are a significant number of artists involved with illogical, broken, and intuitive structures. Among them are Rochelle Feinstein and Harriet Korman, who break up the grid in their own distinctive ways. Korman reduces the grid to arbitrary marks while Feinstein is more engaged with the fluidity of paint as it dissolves the grid. For both, the grid is no longer a mechanical, linear construction; rather it has become an intuitive means to mapping the non-euclidean space of painting. They have transformed it into a graceful infrastructure, making the next point unpredictable, non-hierarchical; there may not even be a next point.

Valerie Jaudon's work is an example of the subversion of the masculinity of geometry. She has been willing to see her work categorized as what we normally call the decorative, because the systems she is engaged in result in patterns. Her earlier paintings were as thorough as Sol LeWitt's in approaching painting systemically, but unlike her male counterparts, she did not claim objectivity or eschew taste. (It is interesting that LeWitt, to revitalize

Joyce Pensato, *Untitled*, 1990, Oil on linen, 90" × 72". Courtesy the artist. Photo: Steven Sloman.

his own work, is now engaged in the use of decorative and sensuous colors and surfaces.) The negative criticism applied to Jaudon's work is the same as that which is consistently presented as positive in her minimalist counterparts. She has been accused of being too mechanical, dry, and fussy.

If the male aspect of geometry is determinate and objective, the female counterpart is indeterminate and subjective. Within the feminine, the laws of geometry are not so much broken as made conditional. They are applied to ends for which they were not intended because they become inexplicable rather than mysterious. Jaudon's mock logic is regular. By contrast, Linda Daniels uses systems that generate irregularities. This allows Daniels to position her eccentric marks, whose accumulations result in odd overall shapes. Both artists are meticulous in how they exclude articulation of generative systems, giving poignancy to how they question the function of the systemic. Neither Jaudon nor Daniels offers resolutions, but only leave us confronting sensibilities that are neither aggressive nor intimate.

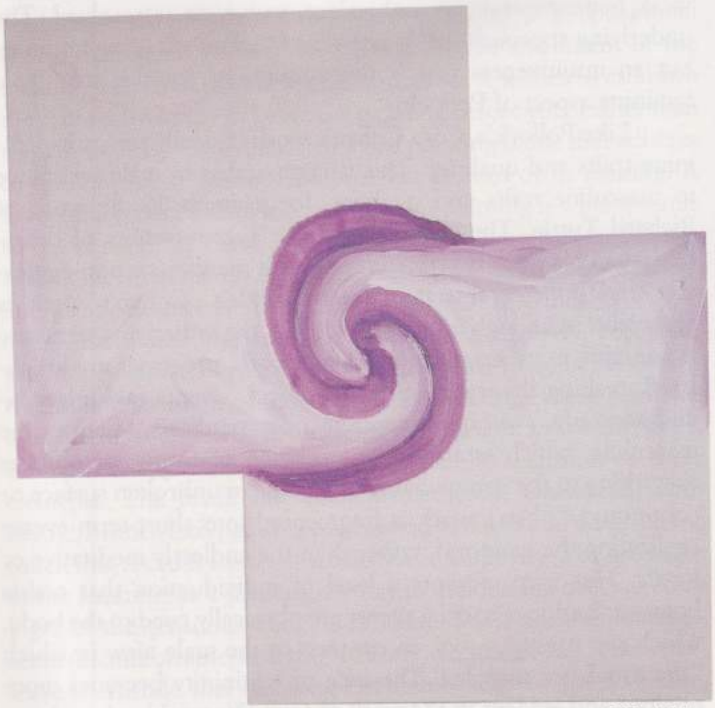
Mary Heilmann addresses the painterly as well as the geometric. She alters both by exaggerating the visual and conceptual determinacy. Her approach is that of a literalist; all is factual, even the indeterminacy of appearances. She indicates a grid, as if to imply that she is reinforcing and partaking of modernism's masculine panoptic aspirations, but instead she demonstrates that such a desire is only an empty husk, a container for other concerns. Heilmann has been criticized for appearing arbitrary and offhanded, craftless and "dumb." She is intuitive; there is no plotting when she decides to paint out elements, or leave a window through which the color of the ground appears. The frontal plane is liquidated as the ground upon which things take place or are placed. The point seems to be that logic is only after the fact.

Joyce Pensato's paintings literalize the physicality of the masculine ideal of brute presence, rather than the intellectual. The masculine paradigm for abstract painting has been reductive (analytic) in nature, discarding more and more in the hopes of finding the heart, the truth of the matter. Pensato in turn strips away at the surface of her paintings to reveal nothing hidden beneath the surface. One can presume, then, that the feminine recognizes that there is nothing but another surface, another structure beneath. Pensato, in using the male paradigm, is actually resisting it. When all is accomplished, she defaces the completeness of the masculine by wounding it and giving the wound (as in the work of Fontana) a positive value. Her paintings are already quite complete at the point when she chooses to gouge into them, yet there is no sense of loss or doubt, only a sense of intuitive completion. The outermost appearance is the genuine appearance—all things include their own history. Here is the masculine's greatest fear, that the strength of the feminine is neither a pale and weak reflection of its own, nor a deceit.

Barnett Newman always knew when his paintings were completed, but Jackson Pollock could only intuit. Pollock, the quintessential male painter, literalized the sign of the authority of the maker over that of the receiver, pitted the unconscious against the conscious. The surrender of the conscious mind allows the unconscious to articulate itself. For the male, such an act is heroic, a mark of genius, but intuitiveness has long been considered a weak feminine trait, as ambivalent, vague, or unresolved. The underlying approach that is actualized by Pollock is the intuitive, but an intuitiveness that is not announced (or this may be a feminine aspect of Pollock).

Like Pollock's, Cora Cohen's work critically resists its feminine traits and qualities. This is comparable to male resistance to masculine traits and qualities, for example in the work of Richard Tuttle. The resistance to the aggressiveness of determinacy in his work is very arbitrary, as it manifests a non-aggressive and ephemeral state. Unlike Tuttle's, Cohen's work is aggressive. Although it looks masculine, the underlying structure is feminine in its atomization. In her work, processes are articulated, making them explicit as a subject. Events take place simultaneously, without hierarchy or synthesis, unlike the masculine, which establishes an echelon of forms, or reduces everything to the commonality of a field, an unbroken surface or continuity. Cohen's work is fragmented into short-term events replicating the temporal, rather than the endlessly meditative or iconic. Her work accepts a level of individuation that resists homogenization. Pictorial events are physically cued to the body, which she uses as a tool, in contrast to the male view in which "the mind is a muscle." The idea of femininity becomes more obvious and evident in the work of Gail Fitzgerald, who takes a stance similar to Cohen's, but "prettifies" the intuitive process

Cora Cohen, *Chthonian Way*, 1990, Pigment, watercolor, Flashe, pastel, copper, oil medium on muslin, 33" × 25".



Mary Heilmann, *Violette*, 1990, Oil on canvas, 54" × 54". Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery.

by choosing colors, such as bright pinks and pale yellows, that have domestic and cosmetic connotations.

In a different area altogether, another type of resistance is articulated by Suzanne McClelland's paintings. Her use of language is an attempt to escape the male voice by choosing to depict the language of the domestic. Her approach to painting, though not strictly abstract, avoids figuration by making her representation so personal as to be nearly unrecognizable. McClelland resists any muscle-bound expressionist aesthetic, though her crudity may be associated significantly with the masculine aesthetic of Joseph Beuys, and David Ireland's conceptual shamanism. She is aggressively offensive in her resistance to the commodified aesthetic look of post-conceptual art and the expressionism of symbolist abstraction. While Beuys and Ireland are anti-aesthetic, McClelland is non-aesthetic. Instead of using vitrines and other devices to frame her propositions, she uses the traditional format of painting, which has always been assumed to be male ground. Her post-painting events can be seen as both confrontational and subversive, masculine and feminine, chauvinist and feminist, as her subject and form compete. McClelland's work replicates a social situation in which the feminine can only assert itself by defacing masculine language (painting, in this case).

These artists who paint and do not succumb to the temptations of acceptability have established a presence that, no matter how overshadowed, does not disappear, but creates a variety of tactical approaches to the residual subject of painting as it redefines itself as irreducible to an ideal state. No matter how ridiculed or marginalized, that position cannot be abolished. The more the "masculine" solution fails, the more we realize that what is being articulated are many alternative paradigms, ontologies, and epistemologies, not only feminine ones. In relationship to our present time, we need to reorganize our point of view to understand the changes, shifts, and increased velocity of our lives. The criterion left to us to judge the value of a painting (or anything else) is whether a given position achieves a desired result at a given point in time. One can no longer justify judging it against some ideologically predetermined paradigm that is meant to move us closer to an abstract ideal. The feminine in this situation is constantly in a no-win position, because when it does aspire to the male, it is written off and judged to be inferior or minor; when it challenges it, it is co-opted, used to revitalize the dominant mode, which nourishes itself on opposition, taking its vitality from what it can marginalize. But now all the strictures that have ruled our society are being thrown into doubt, including the ones that define the "feminine." The feminine and the androgynous are breaking through the social membrane to emerge as significant forces. □

I would like to thank Saul Ostrow for his invaluable support and cooperation.

1. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Art News*, January 1971, 22–39, 67–71.
2. Joan W. Scott, "Deconstructing Equality—Versus Difference: Or, the Uses of Post-Structuralist Theory for Feminism," in W. Scott, *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York, 1990), 134–148.
3. Jacques Lacan, "The Subject and the Other: Alienation," in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New York, 1981), 203–15.
4. Ibid.
5. Jacques Lacan, "The Meaning of the Phallus," in *Feminine Sexuality* (New York, 1985), 74–85.
6. John Lechte, "The Importance of Kristeva," in *Julia Kristeva* (London, 1990), 199–215.

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