

Art

Stretching the Canvas

By *Blake Gopnik*

Washington Post Staff Writer

Monday, December 25, 2006

Can an artistic movement have a personality? A pair of exhibitions now at the Katzen Center's American University Museum surveys two moments in American art, only a decade or two apart in time but worlds apart in temperament.

On the first floor, there's a small exhibition called "William H. Calfee and the Washington Modernists," pulled from the Katzen's permanent collection. It shows work by a group of mostly local artists, made in the 1940s, '50s and '60s but often working through artistic issues that took hold years earlier. These artists turned out plenty of very attractive pictures. Their works refine and tweak and dig deep into the innovations of Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning and even of Picasso, in his more abstract moments. But show these late-in-the-game artists a Rorschach blot, and they'd probably see nothing but placid stability: A suburban bungalow, maybe, a cottage by a lake, a retirement check. To move forward, for them, was to stolidly play the hand art history had dealt them.

This is the way most art was made over the past 500 years: The ideas of a few innovators got adopted, consolidated and eventually fully worked through by the generation of artists who came after them. There were always plenty of outliers, of course, busy doing their own, excellent thing. But most artists likely felt there was a task at hand at any given time, and set their hand to doing it. Which is precisely *not* how things work upstairs at the Katzen. That's where you'll find "High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975." It's an important touring show put together by Independent Curators International, an organization much admired for shining light into some of the more obscure corners of recent art.

If the artistic moment recalled in "High Times" were a patient on the couch, you'd diagnose a florid case of mania, with disordered thinking, some attention deficit, signs of sexual obsession as well as possible psychosis, perhaps drug-induced. There's no sense of artists working through a coherent set of issues. Their works head every which way at once.

There are moments of psychedelia, in the loopy skeins of color spray-painted onto canvas by Dan Christensen. And that psychedelia becomes psychosis in the work of Yayoi Kusama, a Japanese artist who has had a big revival lately. She made art from what she'd seen during moments of actual hallucination. At the Katzen, she's showing a video that documents a true-life art-world orgy, in which the naked revelers are covered in the dots Kusama saw plastered on things during her occasional psychotic breaks.

There's a more blissed-out groove in works by several other women artists. (The show sets out to prove that 1970s abstraction pushed against the old boys club of earlier painting; there are lots of women and minorities in it.) Jane Kaufman, for instance, paints a gorgeous, almost uniform canvas of burnt-orange acrylic, titled "6 p.m.," with a slightly brighter glow of yellow in the middle. It looks like what you'd get from staring too long at a candle at dusk. It is the most sober, pared-down moment in a show that tends toward frenzy, as its artists thrash out ways to find an abstract art that matters.

Lynda Benglis tried to move abstraction forward by pouring rainbow glops of paint right onto the floor, where they congeal as lava flows of color.

Louise Fishman cut a black canvas into strips, then tied them together with white string and hung her piecework on the wall -- literally deconstructing and reconfiguring the classic painted canvas of her predecessors.

Jo Baer and Cesar Paternosto rebelled against the old idea that paintings are flat surfaces to be looked at from in front: They tacked their canvas over three- or four-inch stretchers, then applied orderly geometric patterns to their thick edges. You can't take these pictures in at a single glance -- as was the stated goal of earlier hard-edge abstraction. You have to walk around to see the different compositions on each side, and how they interact over changing space and time.

Several of the "High Times" artists tried to inject some politics and social conscience into their abstract art. Harmony Hammond's "Floorpieces" may be the best works in the show. Each one takes the form of a round of cloth assembled from braided strips of brightly colored fabric, laid out on the gallery floor rather like a circular rag rug. Almost exactly like a rag rug, in fact. Hammond doesn't simply admire the abstract chops of untrained folk and fabric artists, the way people had done for years. She insists that their "feminine" ideas and techniques are absolutely valid as the highest of high art, and worth borrowing intact.

Folk art gave Hammond access to an informality and modesty that earlier, prissier abstraction had avoided, and it's a quality that many of her colleagues in this show were also aiming for. They countered the overblown, pseudo-metaphysical ambitions of a Barnett Newman or a Mark Rothko by making objects that barely register as more than slight conceits, modestly realized. An octagon of white paper, once cut out and pasted to the wall by anyone who wants to, is enough to count as art, according to Richard Tuttle, the only artist in this exhibition who went on to have wide-reaching influence.

If the searchings of the "High Times" artists seem to veer between the desperate and the frantic, that is because they were reacting against a fashionable notion that abstract painting had already been worked to death, reduced to the diminishing returns seen on the Katzen's lower floor. "Look at us," these artists say, "painting can't be dead, because we're still painting, more and wilder than ever."

They were right, obviously. There was too much abstract painting being made in the 1970s, in too many different modes, for it to have been truly dead. But in trying to save their medium, the "High Times" artists so expanded paintings' scope that it started to lose meaning as a single discipline. All their undirected, manic verve could be mistaken for death throes.

A worm that's been sliced up shows more signs of life than one that's still intact: Each bit wriggles in its own direction. But it's not a fate most worms would wish upon themselves.

Through Jan. 21 at the Katzen Arts Center at American University, 4400 Massachusetts Ave., just off Ward Circle. Free. Open Tues. through Sun. 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. and from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. on the last Wednesday of each month. Call 202-885-1300 or visit <http://www.american.edu/museum>.