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Doug Ohlson's Color Condensations

The "objectness" of Ohlson's canvases has always been modified by evocations of atmosphere. This enabled Ohlson, over the years, to articulate color, shape and surface with increasing subtlety.

BY CARTER RATCLIFF

Most of Doug Ohlson's new paintings drift toward autumnal complexity. Even where his colors are high-keyed and citrus-y, his tact cuts back the glare of full saturation and warns that the pleasures here are not simple. In *Morning* lets subtle grayings and beige-ings turn some of its yellows to intimations of an entirely different range of hues. This work is haunted by declined possibilities of green and red. Ohlson's touch with the palette knife is as tactful as his color. It states the fact of oil paint with a firmness that frees the eye for speculation instead of gluing it to a laundry list of "formal factors." His new paintings integrate their components so thoroughly that unities of place, of light, of the qualities of weather, are evoked immediately.

These canvases are all in the neighborhood of 66 by 66 inches; some move an inch or so away from a square format. *Scale of Darkness* is clearly vertical—77 inches high and 56 wide. Its surface modulates from wet to wetter and back with the same ease that the painting's slaty light shows as it tends toward and away from a clear, chilly blue. Implications of a geography—perhaps a geology—point beyond themselves to hints of a meteorological sort. Strong textures ascend along the sides of the canvas and across the surface of its wide inner field. Then, near the top of the canvas, the overall ascension stops, sometimes making contact with the stripe extended along the upper edge and sometimes not. Horizontal meets vertical but doesn't block or confine it. There is no sense of pictorial forces channeled, of form jostled into place. Ohlson's color areas comport themselves like thought-laden clouds, even when, as in *Scale of Darkness*, their light brings them close to earth. The effect, from painting to painting, is of intricately achieved authority, yet there are bafflements on first contact.

The light and the weather of these paintings start to come into focus as the eye notes that the color of the central field is always a variant on the underlying color that shows at the corners of the canvas. To jump from the actual edge of the canvas to the pictorial edge of the inner field is always to arrive at a deeper tone and fuller saturation, lusher hue and richer texture. You see that as each painting has two sets of straight edges, it also has two surfaces—one actual, physical, the other the pictorial, virtual surface of the inner field.

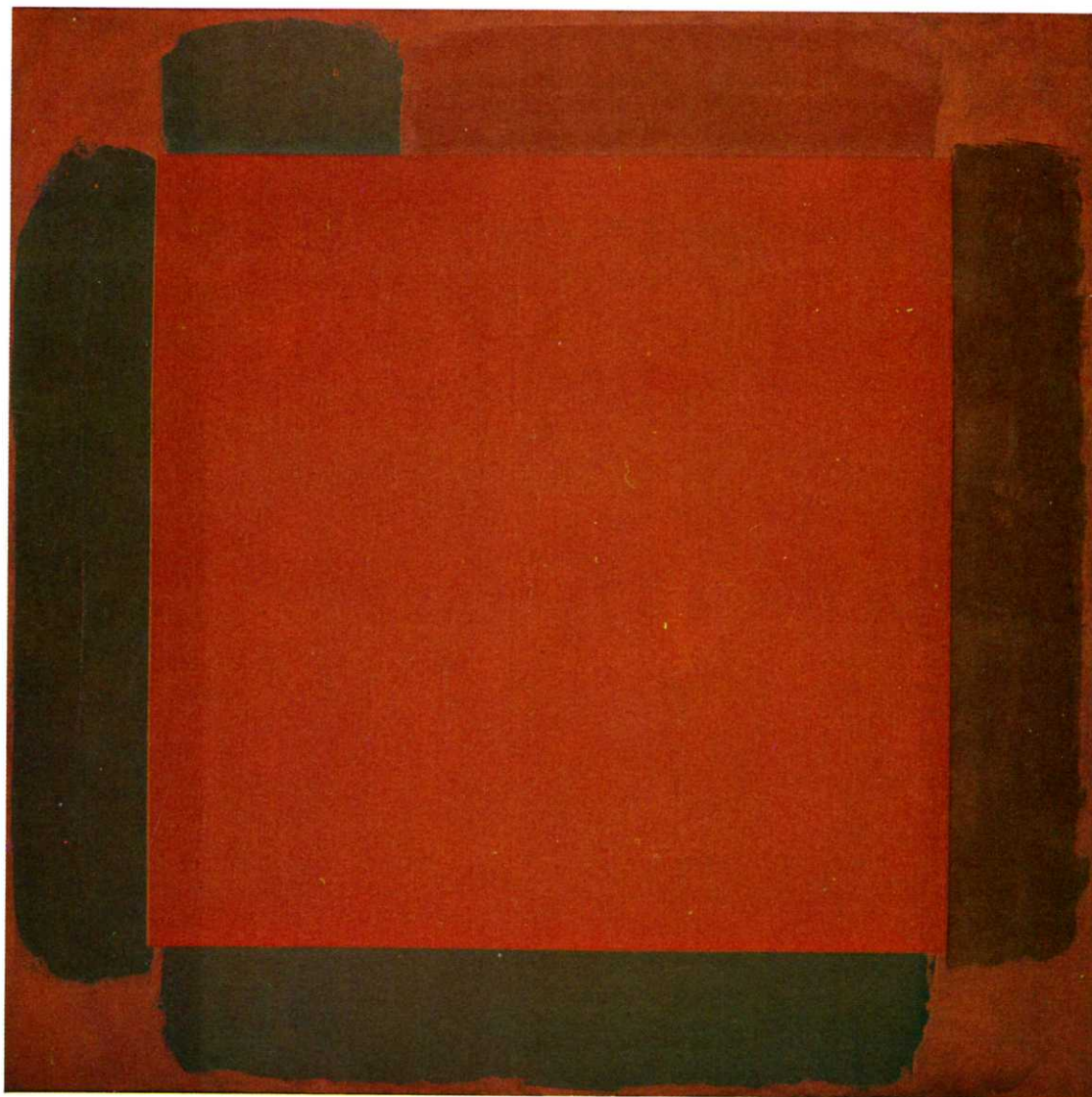
The condensation of color that produces the virtual surface could be imagined just as well as a contraction—one which leaves empty a frame-like area. Ohlson fills this "frame" with wide strips of color. Their varying lengths and shapes set up a rhythm around the edges of the inner field, which both questions and reinforces its isolation. Questioning dominates, as the eye modifies the pictorial

speeds of the individual strips—from slow to slower—in response to their colors and placements. Each one proposes a different relationship with the color and texture of the inner field, hence a different definition of it. Integrity, in Ohlson's art, is generated out of the constant reinvention that each painting undergoes as it guides the eye through interchanges of color and line, color and area, the actual and the virtual, persistent presence and strong allusions to imaginary sites.

Ohlson first showed in New York in 1964. His earliest paintings arranged form in self-evident symmetries, so he was grouped, naturally enough, with others who accounted for the surface in "deductive," systemic, serial or generally Minimalist ways. His new works present a square-within-a-square format similar to that of some of his first mature paintings. From the beginning, however, Ohlson's color made strong suggestions of pictorial space. The "objectness" of his canvases has always been modified by evocations of places far from the art world's laboratory of pictorial permutations; thus the way has stayed open for him to increase, season by season, the complexity of the decisions he makes about color.

Despite the persistence of '60s-style forms and formats in Ohlson's work, none of it has ever generated a serial momentum. He never cools down a painting by giving over decisions to materials, process, formal "deductiveness" or optical effects. Instead, he immerses himself unreservedly in the specifics of each work, bringing it to completion from the difficulties they generate. This recalls the risk-taking of the Action Painters, a connection his sprayed and sponged-on fields of 1970-76 put on the clearest formal ground, for the integrity of these color fields is built from sudden bursts or splashes of paint. The latest canvases require a less risky sort of facture, but the difficulties they undertake often reach new extremes. The artist is required to maintain a constant, wide-angle focus to prevent color-unities from slipping away to arbitrariness or impossible complexity. That is what accounting for the surface becomes for Ohlson—a process of inflecting it with unrelenting attentiveness. His accounting has a first-generation intensity, but there is a shift in scale.

From de Kooning to Newman, the scale of the early New York School painters was set by impulses toward myth. Finding themselves isolated in a hostile cultural situation, they compensated by raising their concerns to the level of historical, esthetic and psychological absolutes. Out of the yearning to make the scale of painting as grand formally as it was in intention came the unified sweep of the allover



Doug Ohlson: *Thea*, 1977, oil on canvas, 66 inches square. Susan Caldwell Gallery.

field. In appropriating and cooling down this invention, reductive painting did away with the problem of scale. Pictorial systemics rendered the connection of form and format self-evident, and that was deemed sufficient. What you saw was what you got. The artist simply made it big enough for you to get it with no strain and no delay.

Ohlson's formats have made it possible for him to equal '60s-style images for presentness. His paintings are always right there in the room with you. At the same time, their color undercuts their physicality, encouraging the eye to refocus itself in a speculative mode. There are openings onto distances, but not myth-haunted ones. Ohlson's scale stays elusive, though it helps to recall a free-standing installation he devised in 1969. It consisted of eight multi-paneled, generally vertical paintings arranged in a continuum on support-panels which enclosed two ambiguously related spaces. The latter, not incidentally, were similar in shape to the inner fields of his newest paintings, and the relationship of these enclosed, hidden spaces to the canvas panels that surrounded them has its analogies to the relationship of fields to enclosing stripes in the new work. But by displacing his imagery from the gallery walls, Ohlson may have pushed complexity too far toward a free-wheeling architectonics. His eye is thoroughly, richly, sometimes excruciatingly pictorial.

The importance of the 1969 installation is that it suggests something about the scale of all his work: that Ohlson holds to the scale of inhabitable space.

This scale is enforced by Ohlson's tact, a quality he refines to the point where it almost becomes aggressive—but of course he is too tactful to let it do that. The reds of the "China Series" field paintings 1975–76 are so delicate—despite their high key and full saturation—that the eye is reproached for its grossness. But there is always another color that shows through the floating pattern of splashed-on bursts of red. By permitting the eye to make distinctions of this sort, these canvases make themselves both available and immediate. In the new ones, the wide stripes that appear around the edges of the inner field are held there by such authoritative gestures of placement that the eye almost wants to imitate the stripes' tact and not stray onto the field itself. It does, inevitably. The reward for the transgression is to be immersed in a unified image with two qualities—a first-generation richness, drawn from pictorial risks pushed up to a monumental scale; and an immediacy which can be startling, especially in the most autumnal works. Immediacies always have a lot to do with scale. Ohlson's are the result of the heroic tact with which he holds his images to the scale of the space where our perceptions occur. ■