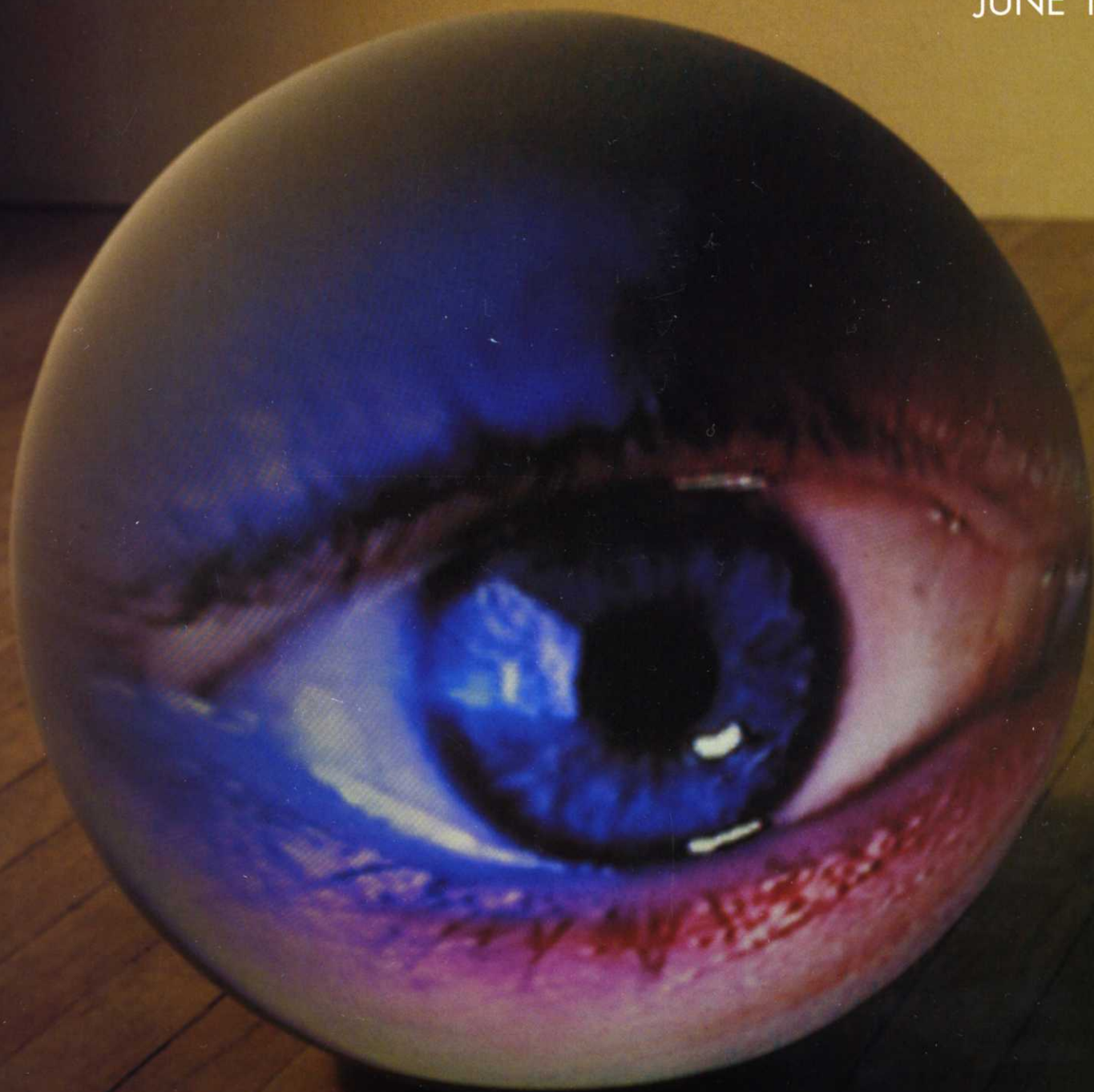


# Art in America

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TONY OURSLER  
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TINGUELY & SAINT PHALLE

While studying painting at Princeton, he became intensely interested in Chinese Yüan dynasty landscape painting. The Yüan dynasty lasted for less than 100 years, but in the long history of Chinese art it occupied a key period. China was then under harsh Mongol rule, and artists fled from the courts to the mountains, where they befriended Buddhist monks and Taoist priests and began to free themselves from academic restrictions. The result was a school which produced paintings of natural scenery allied with poetry—some of the greatest landscapes ever produced anywhere. Although Gray studied with Jacques Villon and André Lhote in France, there seems to be no influence from them in his work, nor from the Americans of the New York School he got to know later on.

Each of these recent works consists of giant ovoid forms, sometimes overlapping and often suggesting strokes made with a single brush; there are also shapes bordered with a choppy calligraphic line. In some works it is difficult to name the colors, and yet the colors are always there, even if nameless.

It is only by looking long and intently at these paintings that it is possible to savor their true quality. Gray has said, "I have no place on the current art scene. Everything that I want in my painting seems to have been out of fashion for some years.

For example, I believe that looking at a painting should be a meditative experience. That's not a fashionable idea today." Perhaps not, but there is hardly any other way to experience a work of art—especially when a number of the paintings are named for the Eumenides, or Furies, and inspired by the writings of Aeschylus, which the artist read recently in a new translation by Robert Eagles.

—Lawrence Campbell

## Doug Ohlson at Andre Zarre

In Doug Ohlson's paintings, the basic unit is a tall, luminous slab of color. Sometimes it takes five of them to occupy a canvas 6½ feet high and 10 feet wide. Sometimes three are enough. Thin strips of a contrasting color establish the edges of the form. Hard-edged or feathered, their boundaries reach calmly over the surface, filling it with quietude. Yet the depths of these paintings are unsettled. Ohlson's hot oranges, yellows and fuchsias are filled with something like shadows.

These colors have a strange ripeness, which had not yet appeared in the paintings he showed at the Fischbach Gallery during the late 1960s. In those days, the edges of Ohlson's forms were sharp and he was seen as a Minimalist—a "systemic" artist who generated orderly effects by varying his basic module, a tall canvas panel covered by flat, bright color. According to the reigning assumptions of the times, there was only one way for Ohlson to progress: by imposing ever more orderliness on his images. He took a different direction, permitting quirks to inflect his modular variations; and he persuaded his colors to give up their matte opacity by small, almost unnoticeable degrees. As Ohlson became a virtuoso of atmospheric glow, hints of immense open space appeared in the depths of his canvases.

During the early 1970s, many still believed that art must advance along lines

laid down by avant-garde logic. In light of that belief, Ohlson appeared to be drifting backward. It is truer to suggest that he had become indifferent to avant-garde pressures. While many artists of the '70s were exchanging membership in the avant-garde for political allegiances of one sort or another, Ohlson revealed his affinities to an earlier generation of painters—Barnett Newman and, especially, Mark Rothko. He wasn't turning to the past so much as brushing aside every demand that might have bound him to the moment or focused his attention

on the immediate future. By his own path, he had entered the realm of New York abstraction in the heroic mode.

A predilection for bright color survives from his early work, along with a liking for tall, rectangular shapes. The elongated panels of his early days have become the vertical slabs of color in his later canvases. Slim and monolithic, this persistent form may be an abstract painter's surrogate for a standing figure—presumably his own. An array of these forms is not a crowd, not an emblem of society, but the artist's self in various stages—though it's easy to be too literal when trying to make sense of paintings like these. It's better to focus on edges as they blur, and the figure—solitary or multiplied—dissolves into the ground. Colors merge, call one another into question, and you are drawn into a field of light, which is one half of Ohlson's abiding subject. The other half is the darkness that his colors never quite succeed in banishing.

—Carter Ratcliff

## Mary Heilmann at Pat Hearn

This exhilarating show testified to painting's continuing ability to refract, concentrate and create experience. The small-format pictures, almost all made of oil on gessoed paper, typically play geometry against something else—color, gesture or complexi-



Forrest Myers: *Toon*, 1996, powder coated aluminum, 40 by 36 by 50 inches; at Art et Industrie.

ty of construction—to create a density of feeling and idea often belied by the simplicity of means. In *Crimson & Clover*, for instance, an acidic yellowish green oblong overlaps another of pinkish vermilion against a white ground, the eccentricity of color unhinging the painting's geometric classicism. *House of Blues* counterposes the regularity of a grid against gesture and intensity of color. The touch here is legible enough to establish a sense of surface despite the depth of color. Though luminous, the image is as closed as a wall.

The balanced conflict between the closed and the open was a leitmotif of the show, in fact, as witness the use of "screen" to title several of the pictures. *Like Cartier Bresson* indeed brings to mind that photographer's famous image of a black-windowed building; the painting's black rectangles read both as openings and as shapes sharing a surface with their white ground. This double reading reminds us that a window is both an opening in, and part of, a wall. *Richie's Trick* provides a particularly complex variation on this theme, with a field of light aqua painted over conversely positioned sets of black and white squares, whose neo-moderne beauty both attracts and checks the eye. The physical layering of paint, with careful looking, provides a match for the alternately penetrable and resistant geometry of real space.

Such spatial dualities are

Herbert Brandl: *Untitled*, 1996, oil on canvas, 102½ by 86 inches; at Jack Tilton.





Cleve Gray: *Imminence #6*, 1995, acrylic on canvas, 80 by 60 inches; at Berry-Hill. (Review on page 98.)

replayed more generally in Heilmann's juxtaposition of abstraction and representation. Like a number of artists working today—Dona Nelson is another—Heilmann accepts the distinction between these modes but sees no need to choose between them: modernism provides her with a language that can be inflected in either direction, or both at once. A seemingly non-referential painting like *Socorro*, whose horizontal bands of vibrant color provide a variation on Heilmann's wall-like grids, was echoed by a series of works that, with their blue-black and white bands, are clearly responses to the ocean. (Mondrian, whose influence is unmistakable in Heilmann's work, also found an analogue for the pictorial field in the sea.) Evoking space without representing it, the ocean pictures speak of regularity, power, repetition and size—features painting shares with the waves. Size alone here is not literal; the density of content in these paintings makes them, however fleetingly, effective equivalents for the breadth of the world outside painting. —Paul Mattick, Jr.

### Mary Corse at Ace

To exhibit at Ace Gallery must be both exhilarating and exceptionally daunting, even for the most ambitious and self-confident

artist. Its unforgiving spaces inevitably become a player in their own right; in these art-vs.-architecture face-offs, it's the survival of the fittest. Some shows have looked amazing, work and space in total sync; others have seemed diminished by the gallery's cavernous recesses. Mary Corse's exhibition this past winter surveying 30 years of her art from 1964 to 1994 unfortunately fell into the latter category, her monochromes drained by the milieu, unsustainable by Ace's cool, monochromatic architecture.

Corse has great inventive abilities and a range that should have carried the day; she has

rigorous craftsmanship and she most certainly has ambition. While the scope of her aspirations and the dimensions of her project have always been impressive and her focus clear, her vision in this instance was not well-served by her most recent production. Particularly in the latest paintings—*White Light Painting with Squares* (1994) and *Black Light Painting (Shadow Painting) with Four Arches* (1994)—she seems to have succumbed to the temptation of sheer scale. These are two of the largest works she has ever made, at a looming 8 by 34 feet and 9 by 28 feet respectively. They are imposing, but at a cost: delicacy and differentiation of surface have been lost. In Ace's enormous, echoing galleries, the pieces had the chilly, programmatic air of art associated with corporate megalobobbies.

Corse, a Californian, was an early admirer of Robert Irwin, and like him, has spent her life analyzing light and its effects. Her mostly monochromatic paintings of deep blacks, pure and off-whites and grays that shade from a sparkling, near black to a subtle, pearlescent shimmer each give off their own luminescence, creating an illusion of ambient space or depth of field on a two-dimensional surface. In pursuit of light—phenomenological but, in the end,

not without sublimity—she has constructed spare, sophisticated light boxes and fired lustrous ceramic tiles; she has also mixed small squares of metallic glitter and glass microspheres into her paint to up the wattage. The earliest pieces in the show were white geometrically shaped canvases from the mid-'60s, followed by the light boxes of a few years later.

As you entered the gallery, at one end of its long central corridor a brilliant white screen flickered and hummed in a darkened niche like an electronic oracle. Square, modest in size, it hovered over a white base and, from a distance, seemed to be suspended in mid-air; but it was actually held in place by thin, clear wire. At the other end of the corridor were two slender 8-foot triangular columns aligned so their baselines were parallel but not quite touching, their apices pointed outward. These were also white, with fastidiously worked, softly radiant surfaces. Surface, scale, light, color and shapes were absolutely consonant in both these works, which combined an auratic presence with an utterly pragmatic and variable materiality that made them the single, most satisfying installation of the show. Many of the earlier works from the '60s and '70s were also compelling as their surfaces resonated between the solidity of matter and the insubstantiality of light.

In other galleries, the ongoing "White Lights" series, also begun in the late '60s, were shown, followed by the eye-catching, gridded "Black Glitter Paintings" of the '70s, their basic unit a spangled black square—like glitzy, glamorized, scaled-up

Ad Reinhardts. The "Black Earth" paintings—glazed ceramic tiles with uneven, wavering surfaces cast from the rocks near Corse's home—gave way to the first *Black Light Painting* of 1983; these were not made with metallic sequins but with glass microspheres, like the "White Light Paintings." In the late '80s, the "Gray Light Paintings," "Gray Grids" and "Black Arches" (really post-and-lintel sequences) appeared; the latter provide another framing device, like the beveled edges she frequently uses, enclosures to contain and concentrate energy within the painting.

—Lilly Wei

### Manny Farber at Charles Cowles

Among traditional painting genres, the landscape, the portrait and even history painting have adapted themselves to new meanings in recent years. By contrast, the still life seems to survive mainly in the form of the vanitas, no doubt because intimations of mortality suit our dour mood better than do celebrations of bourgeois pleasures.

Although there are peeled fruits aplenty in Manny Farber's new paintings, their overripeness speaks more of carnal experience than of the inevitable decay of transitory physical perfection. Instead, a curiously old-fashioned hedonism permeates these lushly painted canvases. They are spread with swelling persimmons, polished and halved apples, clusters of cherries, flower stems and leafy stalks, glass vases and occasional open art books or postcards containing reproductions of Western art masterpieces or works of Japanese erotica.

Doug Ohlson: *Steel Guitar*, 1995, acrylic on canvas, 90 by 144 inches; at Andre Zarre. (Review on page 99.)

