GEORGE BOGART: New Work

25 April - 30 May 1993

There is quality suggesting both stillness and agitation in this show of George Bogart's latest work. The paintings are perplexing yet direct. Swirls swoop in and out like great gusts of wind, and linear forms appear to fly off in the distance. All this suggests a landscape space yet the works are more than just landscapes. In Koln, three glowing pyramidal objects of monumental or miniscule size, push up through a blizzard of dark brushstrokes. What may be a coffin, or a brick, is before the pyramidal shapes, perhaps washing toward them like a sea vessel. Above the pyramids a flurry of lipstick-red strokes becomes almost a mouth, or the remnant of a kiss. Yet none of this is the point, Bogart insists.

These mysterious pyramidal shapes are included in most of the works in the show. They are based on World War II tank barriers that the artist found while traveling in Germany. Like other forms in Bogart's work, they are part of a visual shorthand. They are deliberately generalized so that they can act as stand-ins for more complex forms (Bogart often uses the barriers to suggest the monumentality of Gothic cathedrals, for instance). Tubes, cubes and other shapes, depicted in both solid and linear fashion, are also part of this shorthand. In Bogart's process, having a visual source from which to begin is very important, but he seems to prefer a mental impression of that source, which renders it less firm.

Bogart refuses to belabor content, though he wishes to present psychologically ambiguous situations to the viewer. The tank barriers raise interesting questions about this desire. Though Bogart uses the barriers as a formal element and not to refer to any literary meaning, when the audience realizes what they are, what their purpose was in World War II Germany, does it change the way we understand the lyrical shapes in Bogart's work? The dark and violent aspects apparent in some of the pieces are easily seen
as alluding to the horrors of war, yet in other works, the tank barriers become whimsical and dreamlike. When read in this way, the paintings become frustratingly elusive.

In a time when the content of artworks is once again a primary concern, Bogart continues to affirm that his paintings are really about painting, recalling his early fascination with Abstract Expressionism. However, he isn't interested in these kinds of labels. When I spoke with Bogart, he asserted that being a formal abstractionist had become too easy, too intellectual to be a challenge in the studio. The images are though of as abstractions, which serve to punctuate and play with the space. Their inclusion allows the creation of both object space and flat pictorial space. It is this space, that expands and contracts like breathing, that is the true subject of the paintings.

One (oil on paper) emphasizes this kind of precarious space. The element of landscape is very strong here, so that even though the ground is almost entirely made up of Prussian Blue and white brushstrokes, the impression given is that of sky over water. Yellow and green peek out from underneath the blue and white strokes. In the center, the tank barrier dissolves in a bright white "light" that explodes up from the form and streams out from underneath it. Diagonal white brushstrokes draw the vertical length of the paper over the tank barrier veil the image and steal the illusion of deep space.

Bogart also has the ability to allude to grand scale, even in the smallest of his works. Punch (oil on paper) is only 15" x 15", yet it has great presence. The image is divided in thirds. The top third is muddy, confused. Colored lines suggest piled up forms over flat, brushy areas of black, green, yellow and red. Out of this, into the white bottom third, jut out two seemingly huge yellow forms outlined in black. The right form runs off the edge of the picture plane, but the left one flops out at the viewer, like an old boot, a windsock, or the suggestion of a raspy throat with an open mouth at its end. The evenly spaces scratches at the end of this form add a cruel quality to this piece.

The fresh appearance of the works belies the long hours spent on them. Rather than an additive process of building a painting up from start to finish, Bogart reworks the
entire canvas each time he comes back to the painting. (Several canvases have three or four dates on the back, each a record of a day on which Bogart felt the painting was "finished"). Each painting goes through dramatic evolutions that are often erased (with a belt sander, if the work is on canvas), usually leaving only cuttings of what was previously there. While he occasionally begins a painting with some vague, formal notion of what he wishes the painting to be, Bogart's process is best described as intuitive; responding to the painting and to his own process.

In *Thicket*, the result is enigmatic and magical. Again, the canvas is divided more or less in thirds, this time vertically; two-thirds being wild green brushstrokes gobbling up the tank barrier forms, cylinders and a tire shape. The images vacillate between solid and linear form as they press up to the front of the picture plane. Toward the right third of the canvas, the brushstrokes become pale, merging into the white ground, which appears to recede dramatically. Sitting in the upper right corner is the gentle focus of the painting; poignant, poetic, a small, glowing grey-blue-white pyramid, all alone in the distant chill despite its numerous neighbors on the other side of the painting.

The visual language Bogart uses is highly personal and difficult to interpret. Try too hard to define these paintings, and one may find themselves feeling a little like a pyramid in *Thicket*; looking on at great activity, but from a distance. The works might be frustrating for the viewer who needs to assign a rigid meaning to them, but liberating for those willing to interact freely with the paint and respond to the unusual and emotional color, the fluidity of the space, the forms, and the content, both real and imagined.

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