


abstract
SIMBOL



What brings the works together is their common conviction that contemporary art can express mankind's noblest sentiments and not just his most banal. This conviction, reflecting some of the closest-held cultural values of Chicago, links this work to the city as surely as the Imagist painting. If the Imagists are the boisterous, activist extroverts of Chicago art, these artists are their contemplative introverted counterparts. If the Imagists are realists who allude to the abstract, these artists are abstractionists who allude to physical—and in some cases non-physical—reality. One is directed toward the immediate in hopes of symbolizing universals; the other is directed toward universals in hope of appealing to the immediate.


Structurally, the boundaries between the two viewpoints are more blurred than first seems apparent, made all the fuzzier by the shared source material.² Just as with the Imagists, in this abstraction humankind—not the purely perceptual tricks of shape and color perpetrated by the formalists—is the underlying subject. As Frank Piatek has written, this is “impure” abstraction sullied by the human psyche. Indeed, the human psyche presents perhaps the central linkage among these works, between them and the Imagist paintings, and toward Chicago itself.

The rise of abstraction has always been associated in part with the human psyche. In addition to its formal aspects, the art of primitive people first entered the mainstream of modern art as the primal images crystallized from the human unconscious. As such, primitive art was embraced first by the early abstractionists, then later by the Surrealists. For both, such primary symbolic forms of human consciousness raised ontological questions about the relationship between art and the universe which have nagged artists ever since. Some artists, like Wassily Kandinsky and later Mark Rothko, linked man and art by distilling the spiritual content from such primitive images into abstract visual form. Others, like Jean Dubuffet who developed *l'Art Brut*, used the innocence of the naive or primitive artist to show mankind's—and art's—social estrangement. One interpretation of human sentiment was essentially philosophical and psychological, the other was social and political.

ABSTRACT/SYMBOL/IMAGE: A *RE-VISION*

William Conger
Judy Geichman
Roland Ginzel
Miyoko Ito
Vera Klement
Richard Loving
Frank Piatek
Dan Ramirez
Barbara Rossi
Amy Sheng-Kohler
Evelyn Statsinger
Ray Yoshida

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"Outsider" or folk art—perhaps more than the "classical" primitive arts of Africa or Oceania—have been major influences on Chicago art since the early 1960s. The same distinction between the philosophical or social applications of the "naive" aesthetic exists today in Chicago among the artists who, upon leaving the primal image, went in separate directions. While the Imagists—whose artistic lineage has been traced directly to Jean Dubuffet's reading of his "Anticultural Positions" in Chicago in 1951—are engaged in mythologizing man's social context, the works in this show explore mankind's emotional terrain. Far from being alienated from cultural history, these artists acknowledge the history of contemporary art without deferring to it, taking what is necessary from the parlance of mainstream art to make highly individualistic aesthetic statements. The degree to which the viewer is guided along this interior journey varies from artist to artist, ranging from the contemplative abstractions of Dan Ramirez and Amy Sheng-Kohler to the near-literal images of Barbara Rossi and Frank Piatek. But there are signposts along the way that mark them as fellow travelers in translating abstract ideas into symbolic images.

Unlike most formal abstraction, a high proportion of what has been called "narrative abstraction" exists in this work, evidence of the efforts by these artists to maximize communication with the viewer. In his most recent work, Ray Yoshida paints an actual stage proscenium with figures engaging in a silent drama. The 1977 work in this show "Preposterous Propositions" precipitates the proscenium by placing individual abstract figures in a kind of silent choreography, poised to act out the human drama. Sensory impressions, not figures, are the players in Richard Loving's theatrical setting of "Light Pursuits" (1983). Like stage wings around the arched proscenium, subdued shapes and patterns surround the resplendent illuminated activity taking place on center stage. Narrative sequences are central to the work of Barbara Rossi and, to some extent, to that of Miyoko Ito whose interlocking planes, suggestive of three dimensions, seem like a reality waiting to be decoded.

The works of Judy Geichman, William Conger and Frank Piatek contain the forceful finality of narrative climax, as though the culmination or at least the resting point of lengthy and elaborate stories. Critic Dennis Adrian has correctly pointed out that Piatek's twisting, glowing tubular shapes impart a visionary fervor about an ideal world similar to the visionary images of Thomas Cole or John Martin.³ Like Piatek, Conger shows us in the high drama of his interslicing shapes only a segment of what appears to be an on-going horizontal movement akin to linear narration. Similarly, the spirals of Geichman's painting spin off the top and bottom of her canvas, reading like part of a vertical scroll opened to a momentous point in the text.

Even at the most abstract extreme of the show's spectrum the works are meant to be read for content beyond their purely formal statements. Vera Klement sets up dichotomies based on landscape (nature) and vessels (man). The heightened structure of Dan Ramirez's work has a revealing irregularity indicating his effort to "illustrate thinking," predictably an imperfect process in the human mind. Amy Sheng-Kohler and Roland Ginzler provide windows of color into the interior of perception.

The single trait used most frequently to facilitate the sense of narration in these works is undulating, organic line and shape, one of the predominant visual devices used by the Imagists as well. Directly symbolic of biological life, the lyrical, sinewy forms in these paintings expose their fundamentally romantic nature both in terms of pictorial drama and sensual association. There is ecstasy in these paintings of the kind the American Transcendentalist painters experienced before the splendor of nature which, for them, embodied God. It is interesting to note that another romantic 19th-century landscape painter Casper David Friedrich from Germany, source of American Transcendentalism, is also an important influence on Dan Ramirez, the most abstract artist in the show.


In these works, the organic is expressed in both sensual, erotic terms and in more nostalgic, metaphorical ones. Frank Piatek explores the twisting, visceral knots of organic life with dark, foreboding shapes. His thick tubes simultaneously have a muscular eroticism and, by virtue of their eerie glow, the sinewy expectancy of organisms under formation. For Piatek, who is interested in psychological archetypes, the twisting forms of "Green St. Matthew" (1983) refer to man's primal animal-like nature and the ongoing process of interlocking relationships. The twisting knotted figures of "Sleepers" (1982) by Barbara Rossi has a similar quality. Though unclear whether human or not, the sleeping pink embryonic figures curled within boxes are animal forms, the abbreviated notations of organic life. Unlike Piatek's tightly woven shapes, however, Rossi's knots are loose and disengaged, somehow tentative, brightly colored descriptions of a visceral reality.

In William Conger's intertwining ribbons of color, the visceral nature of organic life moves to the purely sensual. "Salem Run" (1979-80) translates fecund elements of landscape into flashing primary colors full of the dramatic splendor of a spectacular awe-inspiring sunset. Just as Thomas Cole exclaimed in 1835 about the wonder and power of nature filling a "great void" in our minds,⁴ Conger presents a heady magnificence in his work made more potent by its sense of control and certainty. Equally heroic though totally different is "Taberah" (1983) by Judy Geichman. Archetypal in a vein similar to Piatek's, Geichman's monolithic figures formed by the swirling spirals and resonating patterns conjure up an omnipotent force.

Richard Loving, on the other hand, aspires to visually fix sensory experiences as cataclysmic as the creation of life itself. Richly romantic in its pastel blues, powdery pinks and sparkling whites, his "Light Pursuits" (1983) has a lush, diaphanous opulence that fleets across the picture plane like a splendid dream. Order and chaos exist side by side. Meandering outlines trail in the memory of the writhing organic and then marshall themselves into tight decorative patterning. Similarly, Miyoko Ito's softly hued, lyrical painting suggests a hushed memory of intense experience or, perhaps, an immediate sensuality gently controlled and structured. In "Flotation" (1976), Evelyn Statsinger presents an oddly nostalgic mood with organic shapes just within the reach of recognition, as though memories not yet quite gelled.

Organic references take on new meaning in "Preposterous Propositions" by Ray Yoshida. The work most directly inspired by primitive art, this painting is seen as though flattened against a plane of microscopic life. The dense background patterning of tiny molecular bits suggests a teeming life in contrast to the dignified, stoical totems that stand resolute and eternal before it. A similar sense of dignity and resoluteness is conveyed in "Pacific Rim" (1983) by Vera Klement. Like the landscape-derived imagery of William Conger, though less obviously organic, Klement's painting suggests red hills floating in the distance on a high horizon. Looming in the foreground is a huge vessel, representing one of the most ancient objects made by man, seemingly bulging with internal life. Klement's piece is also the only one in the show to use actual natural materials—earth mixed with paint to form the dense matrix of the vessel. Only delicate references to the organic can be seen in the subtly curved shapes of Amy Sheng-Kohler's "Red Altar" (1983) which like most of her work also draws inspiration from magnificent scenery or architecture.


Organic shape and line, however, are not all that give these works a sense of life and animation. Illusionistic space, shimmering light and glowing colors are formal elements used in these abstract works which impart a vitality as effective for them as for their Imagist counterparts. Dan Ramirez, who perhaps makes the purest abstraction in the exhibition, has distilled the life-giving essences of space and light into highly refined paintings of monolithic scale. An artist deeply engaged in the spiritual nature of art, Ramirez conveys the wonder and grandeur of the human spirit through the most economical means, causing one critic to identify him as a "classicist" instead of a romantic.⁵ Yet, there are flashes of unfettered passion in his work, particularly in the swelling crescendos of his color gradations and the colors themselves which, as in the case of "Bild #3," (1979) are deep purples washing into lavenders and lilacs. The spatial dialogue set up between the central graduated color panel and the buttressing triangles furthers the soaring grandeur so subtly stated in Ramirez's painting.



The glowing life-like prisms of color breaking through the white field of Roland Ginzel's "Desbarats #4" (1977) present a joyful, almost playful example of the emotional powers of minimal light and color. Scattered about the large canvas to form two irregular diagonals, the jewel-like bands have a dynamism which propel them metaphorically across the soft white background as though sun-lit particles scuttling across a smooth calm surface. Amy Sheng-Kohler's "Red Altar" similarly conveys the serious play of children. Geometric shapes, units of striated patterns, pencil thin lines of primary color float above her scumbled red picture plane as though parts of a children's puzzle meshed into an invisible, illogical harmony. Often related to actual scenes or landscapes, her paintings fragment structures into their essential elements to create a serene, highly personal abstraction.

Space becomes more literal with the work of Vera Klement. Though like Ramirez engaged in the economical use of imagery, Klement employs both physical and metaphorical layers of space in her work "Pacific Rim." Not only is the central vessel shape built up with heavy textures into a clear sense of volume, but it is painted on a separate section of canvas which is then collaged onto the larger canvas. Behind these two foreground planes of space, the two red hills float in the distance, raised to the top of the painting in the manner of Oriental depiction of distant space.

Miyoko Ito builds up volume through a delicate balance between architectural form and illusionistic space thereby combining reality and fantasy. Originally influenced by synthetic cubism and drawn to the fleeting illusionism in the work of Paul Klee, Ito had developed at her death a dexterity at infusing symbolic life into three-dimensional illusion. Ito's painting resonates with structural and emotional certainty, conveying a sense of clear-headed resolution between the intellect and emotions. As monolithic and dignified as Ramirez's works without the large scale, her untitled painting in the show has a delicate fragility that belies its structural strength. Much of that delicacy is conveyed in her atmospheric colors, in this case a rainbow of aquamarine shades fused into delicate pinks and grays. The dream-like quality of soft colors imposed on hard and complex illusionary three-dimensional forms conjures up a sense of the narrative, as though this painting illustrated a connective fragment of a story. If creating the illusion of space is the visual artist's most magical skill, then infusing the space with a sense of "make believe" creates for these artists what has been called "fictional space."



The sense of fictional space laden with narrative content becomes more apparent as the artists examine their "subjects" from different vantage points. In his examination of microscopic life underlying his "larger than life" totems, Ray Yoshida peels away layers of space to get to the fundamental biology of life. Richard Loving analyzes the physical properties of sensations, his isometric crystalline forms referring as much to geological structures as to Cubism and his sprays of light relating as much to physics and alchemy as to stained canvas. Pulsating lines, like the invisible force of magnetic fields made visible through physics, are used by Geichman to evoke a sense of cosmic life forces. Rossi's X-ray vision reduces animal forms to mere skeletal outlines, just as Conger scrutinizes the dynamics of botanical structures at close range. Piatek and Statsinger contemplate closely the phenomenon of forms without piercing into their interiors. What they examine instead is the surface which gives tantalizing clues to their interior structures.

A final cultural "symptom" shared by these artists and the Imagists is a predisposition toward fine craftsmanly finish. A deliberateness of execution—what Richard Loving calls "obsessional mark-making"—pervades the work in this show. Even the apparent spontaneity of Vera Klement's splashes are controlled through elaborate means during the production of the painting. This interest in surface is consistent with the cultural values discussed at the beginning of this essay, that art is an elevated human activity commanding a certain degree of intellectual intensity and precision. The tension between the perfection of painterly execution and banal subject matter is one of the greatest strengths of the Imagists work. With the works in this show, a sense of reverence characterizes all aspects of the work from subject matter to execution. The seamless fit of psychic resolution enhances enormously the dignity and autonomy of these works.

While unrest and alienation are not major factors in these paintings, one cannot imply that these works are wholly reactionary returns to an earlier aesthetic mood. Indeed, they may be symptomatic of new artistic interest in a greater connection between history and the individual. It is interesting to note that, during the 1960s when the Imagist ideas were germinating in Chicago, a more contemplative art derived from Abstract Expressionism was dominant in New York and that today, when the once-strident disillusionment of Imagist art is now appreciated in New York for its contorted elegance, these more contemplative abstractions are gaining momentum in Chicago. Is a pattern recurring here, in which the Chicago impulse precedes a national one?

Alienation doubtless will never go out of fashion in the art world just as it will always remain a part of the human condition. By regaining contact with aesthetic principles which have survived the test of time and by adding to them, works like the ones in this exhibition may prove that the on-going fabric of artistic accomplishment is worth preserving. Far from being "retardataire," they may be the beacon light art has been searching for.

1. Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's 1953), p. 40.
2. Mary Matthews Gedo, "Interconnections: A Study of Chicago Style Relationships in Painting," *Arts Magazine*, Vol. 58 (September 1983), p. 92-97.
3. Dennis Adrian, "Frank Piatek". *Some Other Traditions*, exhibition catalogue. (Madison, Wis.: Madison Art Center) 1983, p. 48.
4. Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery, 1835." In John W. McCoubrey, *American Art 1700-1960* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall), p. 99.
5. Robert Glauber, "The Dancer and the Dance: Philosophy and Accomplishment in the Work of Daniel Ramirez," *Arts Magazine* Vol. 57 (February 1982), p. 107-111.

Photo credits:	Art	Artist
William Conger	Quiriconi-Tropea	Manning
Judy Geichman	Michael Tropea	Manning
Roland Ginzel	Michael Tropea	Manning
Miyoko Ito	William Bengston	Mary Baber
Vera Klement	Artist	Manning
Richard Loving	Michael Tropea	Manning
Frank Piatek	Michael Tropea	Manning
Dan Ramirez	Artist	Manning
Barbara Rossi	William Bengston	Manning
Amy Sheng-Kohler	Artist	Manning
Evelyn Statsinger	Michael Tropea	Manning
Ray Yoshida	William Bengston	Manning



Richard Loving *Light Pursuits*
1983, Oil on canvas, 60x60
Lent by the artist

Richard Loving, a recipient of a 1983 National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artists Fellowship, is professor of art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He was born in Vienna, Austria, but moved as a child to New York. Originally working as an ename-ler, Loving has shown prominently as a painter in Chicago since the late '60s. Roy Boyd Gallery represents his work in Chicago.

Loving's work has been seen in "Chi-cago Cross Section", Ohio University, Athens; "Chicago: Some Other Tradi-tions", Madison, Wis., Art Center; the "Painting and Sculpture Today" exhibi-tion at the Indianapolis Museum of Art; the Artists of Chicago and Vicinity show of the Art Institute of Chicago; and "Chicago Abstract Painting" spon-sored by Sonoma State University, California.



Richard Loving

From a Journal

June 15, 1979: How does the passion get into the painting?

The wild gesture—the ways the material is used?

Thick—emphatic

Shiny—assertively seductive

Dry—unaware and roughshod

Rough—crude and emotional

Gritty—unfinished and unseductive

Drippy—careless and unthinking

July 26, 1979: Composition: How one gets from one place to another or the movement of a life.

October 21, 1979: (After returning from a short trip to London and Paris) I refuse to cannibalize myself, to turn my back on my culture and my past as an inheritor of the West and all its disease. I will assimilate, yet put forth an optimistic art based on a commitment to feeling.

January 23, 1980: I feel today like playing with those strange, fleeting shapes, tantric geometries, subversive connections, nocturnal whispers, buzzings and pools full of activity.

February 10, 1980: The paintings are descents. I am reaching down into the pools of being. Nature is seen now as the deep, wild "heart of darkness". My ordered marks are a "corrective", ever balancing, ever intellectualizing: And now the brittleness collapses and I am beginning to swim in the deep.

February 15, 1980: (A position) The visual metaphor can't be chosen in advance. It is not pasted to the body of the art work. Out of the physicality of the art—metaphor is generated. Don't be too intellectual!

July 12, 1981: Perhaps there is now a need to make a simpler, stronger painting; not as much activity: more like a glowing stone or boulder! *Contained energy at rest.* The "swarm" coming together, "bits" forming a shape.

January 23, 1981: Energy in the painting from multiplicity and contrast. Transformations from one state to another.

February 15, 1982: Wait for the feeling of rightness! Wait until the feeling of rightness strikes! (An "electrical" connection.)

May 28, 1982: In my paintings I want to continue to see what "catalytic action," the physicality of paint gives to the symbolic imagery I have chosen to use.

June 11, 1983: Much of my painting deals with "resonances" both internal and external or a sympathetic "trembling" with the world.

December 23, 1983: Are the borders holding in the energy or passion? A little too much control!