

## Acknowledgments

I am very pleased that Artists Space is presenting *Abstraction in Process* and am grateful to Roberta Smith for her thoughtful choices and her insightful essay. Roberta Smith is a free-lance art critic who has written for several national publications as well as essays for numerous exhibitions of contemporary art. The idea which initiated this show came about in discussing with her the resurgence of abstract modes in contemporary art and more particularly, a group of younger artists who have now achieved astonishing success and considerable reputation. She accepted our invitation to organize an exhibition and since that first conversation, reassessed the shifts and fashions in contemporary art, in order to produce an exhibition eminently suited to Artists Space. Its mission to present quality work which has not had exposure in other exhibition arenas can be a challenge for a guest curator and she has fulfilled these goals admirably, producing a stimulating and diverse show.

I also would like to thank Valerie Smith, Artists Space staff Curator who helped to organize many of the details of this exhibition. Her able coordination helped to make this show a reality.

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Lastly, my thanks go to Fontaine Dunn, Robert Hall, Benje LaRico and Stephen Spretnjak. It is their work which has made this show such a pleasure for all of us at Artists Space.

Susan Wyatt  
Executive Director

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## Abstraction in Process by Roberta Smith

**T**he four artists in this exhibition have a lot and a little in common. By coincidence, they all work on or with wood, building and shaping their various surfaces and then adding paint and images to them. In a larger sense, they all arrive at a kind of abstraction that is, to some degree, grounded in the real world—literally, imagistically or operationally. But beyond these common points, they are all quite different, working with or without geometry, for example, in ways that range from the severely reduced to the animatedly complex.

In the latter category is the work of Benje LaRico. LaRico fabricates abstract paintings with materials that hail primarily from the building trades. Using wood for his rectilinear or eccentrically-shaped supports, he proceeds to “decorate” these shapes with paint, with additional shapes cut from wood or assembled from sundry two-by-fours, solid or hollow dowels or irregular scraps, as well as pieces of colorful linoleum and wallpaper.

The results strike one less as paintings than as strange intractable models for paintings. One gets the feeling that simply drawing or painting is not sufficiently physical for LaRico. He seems to want nearly every mark to be a real thing, with the coarseness of his materials demanding an equally scaled-up and energetic use of paint, and with much of the actual marking being done with pieces of wood, a drill or a routing tool. (*Penny's Stones* is a good example of such mixed techniques.)

LaRico's materials and his bluntly awkward, almost amateurish uses of them, give his work an aggressive banality and a grating dissonance. His constructions spurn standards of good taste, of fine art materials and balanced compositions. Yet they also demand to be seen in a largely immaterial, optical manner, leaving it up to the viewer to reconcile these differences.

Certain parts of LaRico's reliefs announce themselves as excessively robust. Such is the case with the central ovoid shape in *Pawnbroker*, which is shaped from a series of butting two-by-four beams. This element, the solar plexus of the relief, seems to exist as a kind of anchor for, and challenge to, the rest of the work; everything else must (and does) match its heavy-handed materiality with something different—a kind of high-spirited decorative energy brought on by bright colors and animated dotting. (Although this too is quite physical, being accomplished with little circles of linoleum and painted chips of wood. It's just that these elements begin to look “normal” in relationship to the two-by-fours.) A similar strategy seems to be at work in *Prova*, where four flipper-like flanges balance a wood mid-section so heavy that boats and roof beams come to mind, and give the assembled whole a buoyant, fish-like leap.

In a series of more recent works, LaRico has returned to a rectilinear format, presenting radically different treatments of the same biomorphic central shape. In *Goa IV*, for example, his use of paint and rich dark colors gives the work a softened, suffused feeling; the shifts in materials are nearly camouflaged. In *Goa V*, however, these shifts are exacerbated: nearly every element of the compos-



ition is physically and coloristically discrete, even estranged from the rest. The composition is dominated by a rather jarring configuration made of two-by-fours placed on edge, plus three smallish hemispheres made of garish green foam. Also present are pink dots made of painted wood, two protruding dowels and a couple of overlapping pieces of wallpaper. This piece exemplifies most clearly LaRico's desire to nudge our conceptions of good taste via an abstraction that is corrupted by the vernacular of everyday materials; we seem to be looking at a model of a golf course.

In Robert Hall's work, a rational system is used in a completely empirical, almost site-specific manner. Hall's paintings evolve via a two-tiered process. First, he pieces together a surface, using various rectangular, triangular and polygonal pieces of plywood. He adds and subtracts until he achieves a subtly faceted, angled and occasionally folded ground that feels right to him. Next, drawing and painting, he pieces together a hard-edged image, eliciting a pictorial geometry from the constructed one.

Hall works in a manner that has sculptural implications, and that is not unlike the traditional carver who seeks to "discover" the figure hidden within a chunk of wood or marble, except that Hall's figures are purely abstract. He starts by connecting some of the points defined by the irregular angles and truncations of his support's outer edges and also by extending the lines established by these edges into the center of the surface. He next considers the shapes defined by these intersecting lines. Pencil lines give way to wider bands of red or black—Hall's palette is nothing if not Constructivist. Some of these shapes are filled in with black, white or yellow; others are left bare. Some parts are sanded down and reconfigured (although traces of these changes always remain), until, again, the balance seems right. The areas of bare wood fluctuate continually, reading alternately as shapes of natural color and as a glowing illusionistic space that accommodates the lines and planes of color almost as if they were a three-dimensional structure.

In a sense, Hall pursues some of the ideas first presented in both the early and recent work of Dorothea Rockburne and Mel Bochner. He seems to want to show how a painting, to borrow Rockburne's phrase, "makes itself." Both his built and depicted geometries evolve in an almost narrative-like sequence, each folding into and out of the other with a billowing angularity, each indicating a series of discrete but delicately hinged actions and decisions.

Stephen Spretnjak's lightweight, finely-crafted wall pieces combine the emblematic and iconic with the perceptual, the primitive with the space-age. Their simple silhouettes, which are sometimes symmetrical, sometimes fragmentary and off-kilter, often hark back to an earlier modernism, when artists such as Brancusi incorporated tribal influences into their work. Sensitively shaped, with surfaces that are subtly bevelled, Spretnjak's pieces often evoke abbreviated versions of the shields and masks of African art. Their surfaces, painted in matte and sometimes textured with modelling paste, are equally subtle; their colors are dark and absorbent or, as in *Arabian Note* and the particularly beautiful *Sudden Knowledge*, crisply white.

But even though they are made to hang on the wall, Spretnjak's pieces have backs as well as fronts, and what the backs add is distinctly contemporary. The back of each piece is painted a bright, nearly fluorescent color; pink, turquoise, red, green, orange and yellow are among those used here. These colors give each piece a subtle halo, an aura which mimics the spiritual presence of primitive objects while also adding a synthetic opticality that underscores the streamlined "moderne" character of Spretnjak's silhouettes. Above all, these pieces accommodate double readings. *Split-Second*, for example, is reminiscent of a shield or a spearhead, but it is also explicitly figurative, suggesting a female torso as well as the "little black dress" of cocktail party fame.

Spretnjak also keeps notebooks in which each page is a small but complete and self-sufficient collage. These combine written accounts of dreams and fantasies with images and diagrams clipped from books, magazines and newspapers. They show the artist's interest in the silhouette and suggest how his shapes are derived from or corroborated by things he encounters in the media. These collages give the viewer access to a stream-of-consciousness, stream-of-media narrative that Spretnjak has, so far, chosen not to make explicit in his wall pieces. However, their integration of the formal with the political and the psychological is especially effective, pointing to the emotional resonance Spretnjak seeks in all his work.

In Fontaine Dunn's work, the world is dissected, abstracted and reassembled, part by part. Her paintings are abstractions but they are also landscapes; each combines and contrasts a series of symbols, processes and conventions which add up, more or less, to earth, water and sky.

Each of Dunn's paintings consists of five narrow horizontal wood panels. Placed one over the other on the wall, usually with a gap between, they form a rectangle without quite becoming whole. This process of stratification enables Dunn to work in several modes and styles at once without ever having to worry about the transitions. Thus she reduces the landscape to a series of signs and pictorial devices—basically abstract—with the distinctions between the two frequently obscured.

Several paintings here include a panel on which is centered a black circle: a sign which stands for sun and moon but also for "abstraction." On other panels, a series of loose, painterly strokes suggest water, but also paint itself, introducing the artist's "hand" as well as the long tradition of depicting water with paint.

Space and scale continually shift and expand in these paintings. Among the upper panels of Dunn's paintings are often simple linear diagrams which may bring to mind a radar screen (the top panels of *Out of The Blue* and *One Fine Day*). Among the lower panels, as in *The Pull* and *Way Home*, are relatively subterranean motifs in which hieroglyphs and fossils masquerade as one another. In all this, Dunn evokes the world in a series of isolated and rather formal non sequiturs which nonetheless fit very much together.