

Dan Cameron

Elusive Resemblances

The techniques and effects of color-saturated abstract painting have been applied to a broad range of distinct ends since Kandinsky first evoked the spiritual dimension of non-representation nearly a hundred years ago. We have experienced transcendence, decay, heroism, abjection, neo-classicism, self-critique and even abstraction-asrepresentation, all in the name of a courageous effort to support the mission of abstraction in the face of powerful vested interests set against it. Of course one needn't look hard to find quarters of the art system where fierce resistance to abstraction is still clung to in the name of either traditional or progressive values—for, after all, hasn't abstract art been the New Academy for at least half those hundred years? But given the possibility that abstraction has also evolved to the point where it is simply itself, no more and no less, perhaps we have arrived at the stage where we can seriously ask ourselves what exactly that means.

Hubert Scheibl has long been a dedicated practitioner of a kind of pragmatic sublime in his embrace of a grandly gestural painting style which, to all appearances, seems more closely related to the keyed-up values of post-war existentialism than to the relentless materialism of our own disgruntled age. His ongoing struggle to articulate the ways by which we might become absorbed into loftier themes of contemplation through the sheer visual force of painting has gradually separated him from the more typical mid-1980s argument concerning the joys of provincial neo-expressionism. Scheibl never had a dog in that fight, a fact that has become abundantly clear over the past decade, as the debate has shifted direction a few more times, and Scheibl's practice is now looked upon as something more speculative, more isolated and increasingly difficult to categorize.

Put as simply as possible, Scheibl's new paintings use abstraction as a back-door to the representation of nature, not through the direct rendering of landscape or anything quite so literal, but through a kind of perceptual overload that provokes a degree of surrender to the sheer force of a single visual event. Scheibl's paintings are quintessentially physical in their command of space, and they eschew compositional complexity in favor of a blunt frontality that sometimes seems to push the painting outwards from the wall. At times, Scheibl's simultaneous application of several colors via palette-knife suggests Gerhard Richter's painterly evocation of the chemical soup implied by every photograph's mere existence. The curvature of Scheibl's stroke, however, more closely resembles such natural phenomena as the rock face of a mountain or the passing of storm clouds. Far from commenting on the photomechanical representation of nature, Scheibl is more than content to carry on as if the very act of representation was somehow marginal to the larger subject of abstract beauty and its effect on us.

That some of the paintings' titles are taken directly from the dialogue of the epochal science fiction movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* seems at first to be almost a throwaway for Scheibl. But his point in assigning these apparently incongruous titles seems to be in part that mass culture events are the

social currency of our time, with our lives played out against them as a shared backdrop. Films in particular form our collective memory much as if they had been actual, shared events in non-cinematic time and space, and it is this paradox that Scheibl seems to be pursuing. Lastly, by quoting from the work of one of the most extravagantly sublime film directors, Stanley Kubrick, Scheibl seems to want to insist that although paintings have a completely different cultural trajectory than movies, they are nonetheless equally worthy embodiments of the most elevated questions of their time.

In some of the paintings presented as part of this selection, the majesty of nature's force is the preferred vehicle for conjuring abstraction's quest for permanence. In *Genetic Battle Dotcom B* (2002 – 03), tectonic forces scrape against one another, ruddy hues pushed to the foreground against an undertow of refracted back-light. *Dave don't do it, let it be, stop* (2004) achieves a luminosity that implies a virtual absence of all solid form—except perhaps for a black-against-dark-purple ledge-like outline in the lower right) where the intended horizon has become instead a vertical shaft of blue mist, as much a part of the atmosphere itself as an event within its reach. There is a temporal equivalent to this action that we recognize as our gaze lingers: the slow deliberate cadences of a pulse whose rhythm is less imposed from without than discovered, gradually, from within.

Although his paintings have nothing of the severity of monochrome, Scheibl frequently grapples with a single color at the beginning of his engagement with a large canvas, and often that color ends up carrying the weight of the entire picture. In *Yes, he reacts as if he had feelings* (1998) and *I am scared, Dave* (2003), an intensely brilliant shimmering yellow dominates the visual field, with all the surrounding hues acting in supporting roles. Since it is a strain of yellow that acts to imitate nature without being able to be found there, one's half-sense of familiarity derives instead from the actual wall-structure that the face of incandescent pigment presents.

Dave, my memory is disappearing, I feel it (2003 – 04) is one of the least typical works of Scheibl's latest suite of paintings, and one of the strongest overall. Arranged like floating pillars, the purple vertical forms assume their architectonic aspect from our perspective looking up from below, while the gradual darkening towards the top suggests a chasm into which they will abruptly vanish. Shot through by a sense of the supernatural, the painting nevertheless reveals quite obdurately what it is: an arrangement of strokes, stains, gouges and scrapes that add up to a breathless sense of anticipation, as we begin the slow wait for memory to fill in the empty spaces.