



Figure in Desert, 2003. 30in x 30in.

called non-objective art, that is, art that has no reference to or recognizable relationship to things we can normally perceive and agree that we have perceived.

This evolutionary theory was further developed, without Greenberg's permission, to single out reduction as the modus operandi of art's progress. Throw out the image (too popular, too political or sentimental); throw out composition (too fussy); throw out content. Of course, Barnett Newman, not ever one of Greenberg's favorites but a hero to the minimalist painters and sculptors, never quite got rid of content. Be that as it may, by the late '60s the empty canvas or the monochrome was often thought of as the end of the road for abstract painting, but, as we later found out, although it may have been an apotheosis, it was not the end of painting.

After the monochrome there was more to come. Or, dare I say it, less to come: postminimalism. And then in the '80s a kind of silly, pseudo-expressionism and re-deployment of media imagery, forming what could be called Pop Art Redux. There were, however, more important paths to take, such as that traversed by my current subject.

Manister himself explains that a certain point one of his monochromatic canvases next to another became more interesting to him than any single monochrome in itself. His first step away from total abstraction was to see into his surfaces and pull out, as it were, strange squiggles that suggest ancient writings, as in *Carpet Ride* (1991-94), and most graphically in *Message in a Bottle* (1993) in the current exhibition.

And then the keyhole shape came to him. The keyhole is both a surface shape and an entrance or exit or passageway. It is also sexual or cosmic or both. As the "narrative" developed, the keyhole shapes become personages. *Venetian Saint* (2001), is a clear example of this disturbing and therefore highly effective ambiguity. And then there are angels. The figures *Icarus and Daedalus* in the same year could also be falling angels and in *Sacred and Profane Love*, which seems to be a duel between two keyholes observed or protected by three fluttering angels.

Now, after many inspiring trips to Italy to study Renaissance painting, Manister has been painting personages in landscapes, billowy clouds above. If the titles of his post-nonobjective paintings are any clue, the iconography is indebted to the Renaissance. *Annunciation*, *Venetian Saint*, *Martyr* (all 2001) are take-offs of traditional Christian imagery. The use of Greco/Roman mythology in *Three Graces* (2003), *Icarus and Daedalus* (2001), and *Zeus* (2001) is in reality also very Renaissance in feeling.

The puzzle for many will be the connection between the artist's earlier monochromatic paintings and the sequence of works surveyed in the current exhibition. The connection I propose will illuminate, I hope, both sides of the artistic equation or the dividing line between Manister's flat-out abstract period and his current investigation of figuration, along with and atmospheric and illusionistic depth.

We can certainly see the use of texture and, I feel, the use of a certain palette, as links between the artists abstract period

and the explorations of imagery that followed. As we know from the practice of attribution, touch and subtleties of palette are almost always better fingerprints of art authorship than subjects or images. Drawing, of course, when it is visible on its own, can qualify as touch. But is their more?

I would like to say that Manister's real subject, his real content, has always been the spiritual. Some painters in the modern abstractionist tradition, like Mondrian, Malevitch and Kandinsky---what better recommendations?---intended their works to be spiritual, that is about or perhaps inducing spiritual states. I propose that the post- World War II monochrome, an extreme form of abstract art, is also spiritual. The monochrome, whether by Robert Rauschenberg, Kelly, Ad Reinhardt, and Yves Klein, always refers to the silence of meditation and therefore embodies the spiritual. Once one finds out about Zen Buddhism and "emptiness" it is very difficult indeed to look at a monochromatic canvas without thinking of higher, calmer states of mind.

I have come to prefer this interpretation of the monochromatic canvas to the academic one that suggests, thanks to artist and polemicist Donald Judd, that one cannot look at a blank canvas without seeing it as an object and therefore, even against Judd's wishes (he preferred to call his three-dimensional works "specific objects"), as a work of sculpture. One now might correct this to say a monochromatic painting can be read as a relief with the wall

as the recessive plane or ground, but the notion that the monochrome leads to minimalist sculpture which, in turn, subsumes painting is what needs to be actively contested. One artist contesting this by his work is Craig Manister.

Manister seems to be saying that the monochrome of late modernist painting can equally lead back to figuration, since to the degree that the monochrome is a signifier it too is figurative. In any case, the route from textured monochrome "back" to figuration give figuration a new look generated by the use of all-over texture.

Although Manister is good at form and is certainly persuasive with color, if you grasp the entirety of his paintings so far, the tactile is the key. Texture is what really makes the forms, the colors, and now the images and therefore the paintings work as art. Even now during his figurative venture, his way of applying paint pulls the colors, forms, and images back to the surface and therefore back to the real. His all-over tactile finesse is what unifies and, paradoxically, complicates the exploration of iconography, depth and atmosphere.

That in Manister's case the monochrome should yield alchemical squiggles or angel signs, followed by keyholes that then grow wings is not as wacky as it first seems. Besides, with the paintings at hand, it is all very logical. The emotions are the same as in the monochromes. They are just more visible.



Figures at Lakeside, 2003. 30in x 40in.

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Cover image: Figure in Rock Mountains, 2003. 30in x 30in.



Craig Manister: Figurative Tendencies

22 January – 9 May, 2004

Craig Manister: Figurative Tendencies



A Deposition, 2003. 45in x 45in.

Introduction

The Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences is pleased to inaugurate its new Artists/Ideas series with recent work by Craig Manister. When we began organizing this series at the Institute, I immediately thought of Manister's work, which I had admired in a studio visit. I found that his art perfectly encapsulated the twin goals of this series: the first, to highlight artists who have reached critical turning points in their work and the second, to explore how these turning points reflect broader trends in contemporary art. Manister is a highly trained artist who was greatly influenced by an artistic movement broadly termed the New York School, which emphasized abstract over figurative painting. He recently experienced a major development in his work by incorporating figurative elements into his previously abstract paintings. Manister's career as a teacher of art history has made him extremely aware of both his historical antecedents and the more recent artistic developments that have had an impact on his work. The result is that Manister speaks with an insight and lucidity that illuminates his paintings. In reflecting on his own work, Manister is joined by the noted art critic John Perreault, who has followed the artist's career for a number of years. I hope you enjoy this first chapter in the Artists/Ideas series and urge you to return to the Institute frequently as the series continues.

Bartholomew Bland,
Director of Exhibitions

The Artist's Viewpoint

Stylistic Development

The paintings on view are recent works with several older examples to illustrate the history of my development. The development can be summarized in the following way. When I established my first studio in 1977 I was painting abstract, monochrome, all-over paintings, often called wholistic in style. These paintings are rooted in the post-war work of the New York School painters of the 1950's. They are composed of many small brushstrokes that exhibit an interest in the expressive possibilities inherent in oil paint as substance. I was and continue to be interested in every brushstroke, paying particular attention to how the paint is applied and the potential of the hand's gesture. The brushstrokes are composed to create a unity within the space of the painting so that while the paint is activated, there is none that divides or separates the resultant field. The space of the field is charged and not empty or inert.

The paintings evolved by a conscious decision to explore the potential of drawing within the field. By making marks within the field, as opposed to plotting lines, I gradually learned how to draw in a way that didn't disturb the spacial unity. This led to an interest in systems of handwriting and calligraphy. I aimed to explore the way handwriting relates to the human eye without saying something explicit that could be understood as existing in a given system of handwriting such

as Hebrew, Arabic or Japanese. I found forms similar to runes in the act of painting. One of these looked like a keyhole and began to appear periodically. In time I realized that the keyhole could be used to have several simultaneous meanings and functions. Centrally placed it could be used as a surrogate for the human figure. The keyhole figure could, most importantly, allow for narrative. Turned to its side it could even walk like depictions of Egyptian pharaohs. Lastly, it functions ambiguously as both figure and ground, figure and (metaphor for) passageway.

The latest development happened when thinking about a suggestion that I develop the character of the keyhole figures. While painting, and in direct opposition to the suggestion, I instead found the keyholes figures in what appeared to be elements of landscape. What happened was that the keyhole, instead of being defined further, became contextualized, now existing in landscape.

A Memory

My still young journey in painting took me through two years at the NY Studio School during the mid 1970's, where one drew from the model each day for 3 hours and then painted for the rest of the day. There were additional evening activities but I had a job and could not take much advantage of those offerings. Shortly after my initial arrival at the school I became aware that the painter George McNeil had a drawing class given at night because it was considered to be less traditional, even subversive by the Studio School Dean, Mercedes Matter. I knew McNeil because he gave a lecture on topics in Art History one afternoon each week and he proved to be an intelligent, entertaining and insightful lecturer whose point of view was unique. Although a painter, he held a masters degree in Art History. His lectures were not like any

I heard in college Art History classes. The perspective was very much the artist's, and he told wonderful stories and used his extensive experience to explain the pictorial construction of paintings.

Before attending the Studio School I studied with Pat Passlof and Milton Resnick and worked in a very painterly, abstract style. Now I was expected to draw from observation with the intimidating presence of reproductions of drawings by Cezanne, Poussin, Leonardos, etc. mounted on the surrounding walls. The standards were the highest and I can't say I felt good about my still raw drawings from the model.

My curiosity about McNeil's class led me to call in sick to my job one evening. I entered the drawing studio as I had that morning with paper and pencil and observed the model posing in the usual way on the model stand. The feeling in the room was looser, somehow more relaxed than in the usual sessions. I noticed that McNeil was in the room and working from the model as was the rest of the class of about 15 students. I began to draw. I found that in this more relaxed environment I drew more expansively and took greater liberties with the placement of the lines. I assumed this would please the teacher and I enjoyed myself. Looking up once more at McNeil drawing across the room I became startled. I saw that he worked with his head back, eyes rolled up in his head and made marks on his page with both hands moving simultaneously. I had never seen anything like it. He was like a Shaman. Watching him work like that, as though he were in a trance, taught me more than he could tell me verbally. I knew then that I was going to be profoundly different. I knew then what I had already suspected. That the experience of making art, of being in the moment, was the important thing and the finished product was secondary. Most importantly, I



Icarus, 2000. 48in x 60in.



Martyr, 2001. 20in x 16in.

also knew that really being in the moment would allow for unexpected results and would produce results better than anything I could have preconceived.

I continued drawing with renewed abandonment. Later McNeil passed through the students looking at the drawings. When he came to me he said, "Well you certainly have your thing going." I was elated. He recognized some state of accomplishment even though I had never worked that way before. I felt much better than I did with my more awkward drawings in the regular drawing class. He continued, "I don't think you should come back here. I can't help you. You're too linear!" I wasn't disappointed. I already gained a lot.

*Craig Manister:*The Textures of Illumination
By John Perreault

When I was Director of the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art on Staten Island at Snug Harbor(1985-89), Craig Manister's paintings were monochromatic surfaces of textured colors. To my mind these uncompromising, beautiful works were related to the all-over paintings of Milton Resnick and Pat Pasloff, but they had a nuance all their own. Struck by his diligence and his intelligence, I invited Manister to be a guest-curator, and he came up with one of the best and most rigorous exhibitions during my tenure at Snug Harbor, "Naked Paint," a survey of texture-oriented monochromatic paintings. In 1989, I included him in the last of my Director's Invitational

exhibitions. I thought then and think now that he is certainly one of the most prominent of artists now living on Staten Island but also one whose work deserves even wider attention.

Now is the time for an update. Since the grand period of his monochromatic paintings, I was surprised to find he has been patiently reversing the evolution that many New York School abstractionists traversed on their way to their signature styles. History repeats itself, but in reverse. Manister's turn to imagery, perhaps preceded by Philip Guston's sudden use of cartoonlike figuration several decades ago, may to some be equally disconcerting. Guston had been one of the important artists of the New York School and known for his so-called Abstract Impressionism. Manister's use of figuration is more religious than political and is considerably more charming than He prefers keyholes and angels to Guston's hooded Ku Klux Klan bad guys. Paradoxically this makes Manister's paintings more difficult. They do not gain Guston's easy points for politics, but instead require us to look at the past in a fresh way.

The viewer should be reminded that because of art critics like the late Clement Greenberg there once was a tendency to see art history, even recent art history, as a kind of Hegelian manifest destiny. Abstract art was the inevitable end-point of art's evolution. By abstract art I do not mean here art that is a stripped down representation of something in the world, but intend to signify instead what used to be