

BROADWAY AND LCR GALLERIES

PASSAIC COUNTY CULTURAL AND HERITAGE COUNCIL
AT PASSAIC COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE



CRAIG MANISTER

R E C E N T P A I N T I N G S

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DECEMBER 2, 1999 - JANUARY 18, 2000

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THINKING IN PICTURES

Craig Manister's art originates in modernism's rejection of traditional space that denies the flatness of the picture plane. Beginning with the disappearance of perspective in Cézanne, this experiment continued with the disappearance of the horizon in Kandinsky and in the mental window frame of Miró, to elusion of the single horizon in Rothko's triadic structure and Newman's vertically realigned "zips." Thus all illusion or even allusions to spatial depth—from linear perspective to figure/ground planarity and polarity—are relinquished in favor of, in his words, "a unity or wholeness of an undivided field that stimulates and holds visual interest." Starting around 1977, his early works, in the manner of his mentors, New York School abstractionists Passlof and Resnick, sought to deal with surface, using monochrome hues and hues of close value, to create a tautness, a tension of field animated by incidents of color and light—movement a result not of line but of visual perception of the activated field. "Painting is about making things visible and giving them light," he reflected in conversation in his studio. But the "elimination of air" is essential in order to deny space, kill atmosphere, and effect a compression of surface like a skin lashed tight across the frame. To wit, *Kit Carson* (1983), whose color and texture "reminded [him] of leather."

His work progressed from this *tabula erasa* (in which substance is built from the void through the bare means of painting—its internal frame of reference from edge to surface) to "a desire to draw, make marks in the field without dividing it, maintain the sense of the whole without breaking the picture plane." Out of the visible marks a calligraphy developed, an invented set of signs inspired by the glyphs and runes of Aramaic, Greek, Hebrew, Latin and other ancient languages. These signs were unspecific—abstractions poised between the painted image and the letter—which did not necessarily refer to any concrete reality or idea but resonated from a deeper, more archaic level of the psychic matrix: the "pre-conscious," where pictures precede names and symbolization—the site where people think in pictures and word and image are unified. In *Magic Carpet Ride* of 1994 his central, pervasive image emerged—the keyhole, a skeleton shadow of the past, which when reversed from negative to positive became a surrogate for the figure. "These paintings are metaphors for relationships between people and between people and their environments," he once said. "The finished picture is a record in paint of the struggle for equality between the form and its environment."

The keyhole form is paradoxical and multivalent in form and sense. "It is a passageway, a peephole, through which we can view the picture plane unbroken," that resolves the contradiction of its own terms. By painting the form to equal its surrounding, using color and light to create *passage*, the all-over surface, the unity, is maintained. The figure divided and multiplied adds dimension, without space, to the unity. Titles given after the fact helped "to find out what the paintings were about, beyond the process of making them." *The Loner* (1995), a single form, evolved to the populous *Offspring* (1995) and thence to *Binary Division* (1995) and *The Other* (1997), while in *Twilight Zone* (1996) the figure reposed on its side. Manister's game and humor are partly revealed in his molding and stretching of the amorphous and metamorphic potential of the figure. Thus, the bust or silhouette-like *George Washington* (1997) or, more provocatively, *Self-Portrait as Martha Washington* (1997) of his repertoire.

A trip to Rome vaulted him further into the world of ancient signs and recent paintings are more specific in symbolic reference, more iconic in form. In *The Word* (1998), linguistics and allusion displace formal orchestration, with plays on the motif of the tablet, filled with suggestive but indeterminate signs that recall Pollock's filling of the slate in *Stenographic Figure*. *The Mirror* followed *The Word*, recasting the forms asymmetrically. *Prophet* (1998) juxtaposed a cartouche to the "keyhole," filled with similarly intuited, invented signs; while *Priestess* (1998), a display of closely-valued fiery oranges and reds against a complementary blue ground "felt like a female form," and conjured veiled *tanagra* figurines and the passion of ritual and magic. The quality of mystery, of nuance as opposed to fixity, is integral to his purpose, which seeks to find meaning between rather than in things. *Search of the Ark* (1999) plays on the artist's quest for meaning, tripling then uniting the figures by means of a single arc on the surface of the picture plane. Finally, *The Glass Key* (1999), a spin-off of *Two Disciples* (1999), abstractly evokes the physical and spiritual crucifixion of St. Peter, with a new twist of a modern key added to the inverted, doubled form of the "keyhole" to extend the metaphors of inquiry and passage.

Within the terms of his own invention, Manister has worked out a personal language that advances the search for new pictorial statement, expression, and experience, while equally exploring an inner territory that allows him to paint a space of self-definition in varying, often intense, shades and harmonies of color, materiality, and light.

Amy Winter, 1999

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Named a Distinguished Arts Project and funded, in part, by a grant from the New Jersey State Council on The Arts/Department of State.

Paintings were made with support, in part, by a grant from The City University of New York PSC-CUNY Research Award Program.

cover: *The Loner*, 1995, oil on linen, 24" x 32"