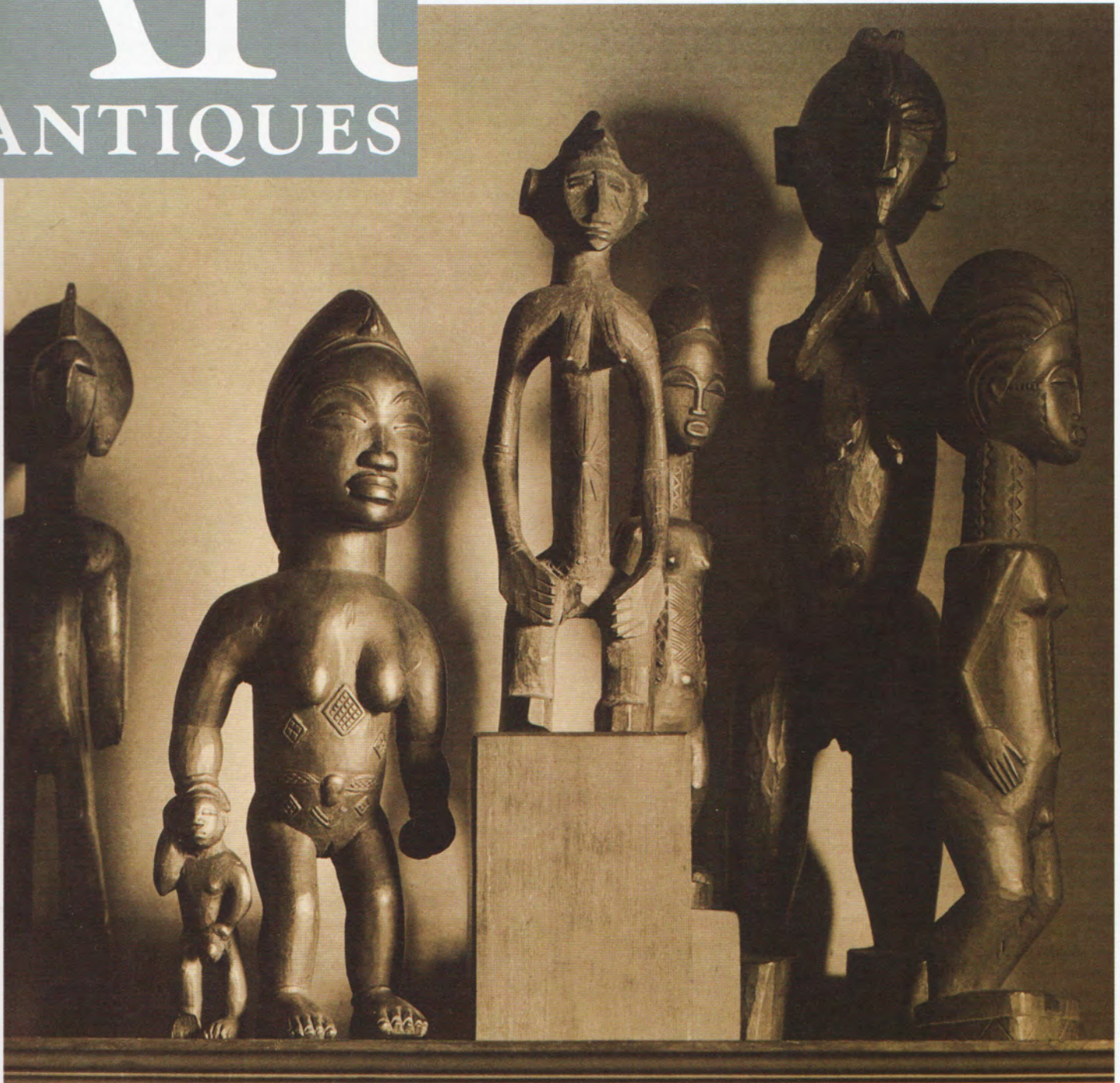


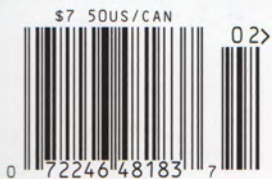
Art

ANTIQUES

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



STUART DAVIS ESTATE JEWELRY PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA ART IN CHARLESTON



TRIBAL ART

Still Abstract After All These Years

THE DIVERSE WORK OF FIVE CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS ATTESTS TO THE ENDURING APPEAL OF NON-FIGURATIVE ART BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ



Girlfriend, 2012, Oil on panel.

OF ALL THE STYLES, theory-driven rallying cries, movements, schools and creative curiosities that have played memorable parts in modern art's evolution, few have been as durable and permutable as abstraction—in painting, sculpture and countless mixed-media forms.

Today, photo-based and conceptualist art genres, influenced by post-modernist critical theory, may still rule the roost in some precincts of the art market, but wherever painting and sculpture are still robustly present, expect to find abstract works by well-known masters and up-and-comers alike on view in galleries and museums. The creations of the five U.S.-based artists profiled here offer a vivid portrait of the different ways in which art-makers are still finding meaning and expressive power in the enduring language of abstraction.



River Lethe, 2012, Oil on panel.



Summer, 2012, Oil on panel.

HELEN MIRANDA WILSON

VIVID COLOR, a formalist's heightened sense of awareness and a perfectionist's attention to detail come together in Helen Miranda Wilson's superbly crafted oil paintings on small wooden panels. Formerly a painter "from observation," as she puts it, of magic-realist nature scenes, Wilson now creates compositions dominated by eye-catching colored stripes arranged in concentric circles, undulating waves or "V" forms that suggest flowing cascades.

Neatly ordered and intense, they hum with a concentrated energy that seems to emanate from the core of each painting-object like the auras of talismanic totems. Wilson recalls seeing Paul Klee's work while spending some time in Switzerland as a teenager. That exhibition "moved me physically," she says, and was a major source of inspiration for her art-making. In 1999, after many years in New York, Wilson returned to her hometown on Cape Cod, where she and her husband, a sculptor, now live in the house she grew up in. There, they raise chickens and bees and keep a food garden. This direct link to nature is important to her.

"What is it? What is there?" Wilson asks rhetorically about her abstract images. When viewers examine them, she says, "I want them to pay attention to my formal language and not bring meanings that they project onto them." That sense of unfettered phenomenological experience seems to be reflected in the purity of her painting technique. On primed panels, she uses fresh oil paint with no added medium. In the past she blended her paints with her fingertips; now she uses feather brushes in a so-called wet-on-wet handling of the colored, oily goo. Of each painting she says, "It's as though the whole thing has poured itself into itself." "I've always looked at things very formally," Wilson adds. "What are the physical components of something?" In part, that investigation is the very subject of her art. Both heady and exhilarating, her paintings still capture the sense of awe about art-making that knocked the socks off the teenage Wilson when she encountered Klee's psychologically intense, formally innovative work for the first time.

MICHAEL NEWMAN

A GREGARIOUS MENSCH who could easily have stepped out of a Jack Kerouac novel, Michael Newman grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and spent nearly three decades living and traveling in East Asia before returning to the Seattle area, via Alaska, in the early 2000s. He served on a U.S. Navy ship during the Vietnam war, then headed back to San Francisco, where he studied at the now-defunct Rudolph Schaeffer School of Design. The school's founder, an artist, designer and writer, collected Asian art and was as a color-study pioneer. "That's where I first saw and actually handled ancient artworks from Japan, China and India," Newman recalls. "Schaeffer emphasized an appreciation of the design elements in art and of the artistic nature of design."

After leaving Schaeffer's academy, Newman spent a short time in Japan, then earned a bachelor's degree in fine art at the San Francisco Art Institute. Then it was back to Asia for a long stay, first in Japan, then in Taiwan. In Japan, Newman studied paper-making and learned, he recalls, that "each kind of paper dictated a different kind of line." He explored and refined, in oil pastel-on-paper drawings and oil-on-canvas paintings, a distinctive blend of impressionistic color passages and decisive, economical brushstrokes influenced by his study of classic Japanese sumi-e (ink-brush painting). In retrospect, Newman's development of those hybrid works was very much in the tradition of Western modernists' long-standing engagement with Eastern philosophy and aesthetics.

Recently, even as his painted images have become more impulsive and minimalist, the artist has found ways to interpret the form and spirit of his brushstrokes in three dimensions using ribbons of pliable metal. "It's scrap metal," he says of his airy, voluminous sculptures' raw material. "I like the visible negative spaces of these forms and their kinetic character." Of abstraction's personal appeal, he says, "This kind of art allows both artists and viewers to feel what they want to from or about a work. That's its message. It's about how something is felt."



Lawrence, 2008, bolted galvanized sheet metal



Seluded Reeds, 2002, oil pastel on western wc paper



A Braying in the Barn, 2002, oil on canvas



Cherry Bomb, 2012, Mixed media on linen



Thought Bubble, 2012, Acrylic on linen

ELISABETH CONDON

POUR, BABY POUR! It was during a residency a couple of years ago at Yaddo, the upstate New York retreat for painters, poets, writers, composers and other artists, that Elisabeth Condon began experimenting with a paint-pouring technique on canvas, combining its results with brushy, random patterns and depictions of various recognizable subjects — trees, rock formations, a craggy mountain here or an isolated Buddhist temple there. Condon grew up in Los Angeles, where she was a teen fan of 1970s glam rock and studied at U.C.L.A. and the Otis College of Art and Design.

Having soaked up that sprawling city's always-in-motion vibe and Southern California's light, she eventually traded her platform shoes for Taoist texts and books about ancient Chinese painting. Her interests and influences are as diverse and unpredictable as her compositions are well-balanced and complete, even inevitable. This is true despite the tough odds she sets up for herself with her combination of postmodernist pastiche and exciting accident.

For an artist who has said, "I want to work with direct experience as much as possible; it feels more real to me" (so goes the love song of abstract-expressionist painting), it's no surprise that she has also observed, "I think about space in terms of layers and immediate visual impact." For Condon, space — real space around her and that of her painted images — is a container for a "tsunami of visual information to sort out."

Settled on canvas, to which, in more recent works, Condon has affixed Mylar sheets, those waves of color have incorporated dramatic splashes of paint and shiny, wrinkled surface textures, too, all in homage to the spirit of the music-club nightlife of the artist's not-so-distant, sequined youth.



Sugar Plum Fairy, 2012, Mixed media on linen

JOHN HIMMELFARB

BASED IN CHICAGO, John Himmelfarb is another artist for whom abstraction's inherent ambiguity is its own reward. "My interest lies in the pure use of visual language without the baggage of imagery or narrative," he says. As a result, some of his works appear to be primarily essays in expressive mark-making. Others, semi-abstract, are vigorous formal workouts that start with recognizable subjects—a face, an old camera, a swirling sea of everyday objects—whose shapes the artist reduces, contorts, explodes or obscures in rhythmic compositions or distorts with gusto.

Both of Himmelfarb's parents were artists. His father was a regionalist painter who had studied at the Art Students' League in New York; his mother focused on nature and architecture and, after a trip to Asia, produced images based on Arabic writing. "I grew up with books about modern art on the kitchen table," Himmelfarb says. Jean Dubuffet and Mark Tobey are among the major modernists whose work interests him.

Himmelfarb has also been influenced by anthropology and calligraphy. "I respond to different kinds of mark-making systems," he says. Like the epic novelists of the 19th century, he feels an urge to tell big stories through his art but also wants it to remain abstract. If that sounds like a conundrum, for Himmelfarb it also proposes an ambiguity-flavored solution. "Stories require settings," he says, noting that his work may simply be seen as offering "a setting in which something happens." Tiptoeing on the edge of figuration while driven by—and steeped in—an unshakable abstractionist's impulse, Himmelfarb's is an art of imminence and ever-shifting focus.



Juggernaut, 2010, acrylic on canvas



Riding High, 1982, acrylic on canvas



South Bank, 1994, acrylic, ink wash on paper

BASTIENNE SCHMIDT

The New York-based daughter of a German archaeologist who worked on the Aegean island of Samos, Bastienne Schmidt was born in Germany and moved to Greece when she was nine. Growing up there, exposed to her father's gathering and organizing of ancient artifacts, she developed her own inclination to regard objects, events and even ideas in terms of themed groupings. Now, with regard to whatever she collects herself or whatever comes into her field of vision, Schmidt says she tends to examine them from a topological point of view. She is interested in how both tangible and intangible things (from soap shards to human corpses) or phenomena (emotional energy, for example) present themselves and are naturally configured, and in how she may arrange them.

That approach helps explain why she tends to work in series and how, almost instinctively, she regards her artistic creations as collections. Thus, Schmidt's photos of dead people in Peru and the local folk culture's traditions regarding death may be appreciated both as a photojournalistic essay and as a collection of image documents of human remains. (Schmidt is an accomplished photographer whose work was routinely published for many years in the magazine of *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, one of Germany's national newspapers.) "Mind Maps," her series of large-format, mixed media works on paper, with their overlapping ribbons of color and abstract or semi-abstract motifs, may be seen as a collection of mappings of free-floating psychological forces and thought processes.



From the series *Mind Maps*, work on paper

Her images of mysterious "Silhouette Vessels," made with polymer, paint and coffee on paper, which the artist applies in watercolor-like washes, constitute, in effect, Schmidt's own creation of a collection of objects that resemble ancient artifacts—or not. They can also be read visually as purely abstract forms. She says: "I'm interested in silhouette shapes, which reduce a subject to a minimum and are very humble." As a keen observer of textures, surfaces and shapes in the world around her, Schmidt says she recognizes many a human being's "innate compulsion to make and leave a mark." An understanding of that urge informs her work. So, too, does this multilingual artist's appreciation of abstraction's expressive power. Schmidt says, "As I see it, it's an alternative language. Having grown up in different languages and cultures, I can say: This is my language." 



From the series *Silhouette Vessels*, 2011, polymer, paint, and coffee on paper



From the series *Topos*, mixed media on canvas