

ArtSeen

# Dan Walsh

by Joan Waltemath

## Paula Cooper Gallery

In Dan Walsh's current exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery in Chelsea, large-scale canvases are hung mostly below eye level. In the 1980's in Soho Alan Uglow made it a point to position his paintings below eye level, a move which not only added a sense of gravity to their bearing, but reflected the position of abstract painting at that time as being below the radar. Walsh is not the only painter to respond to Uglow's influence. Yet over a number of exhibitions from the mid eighties to the present he has carried the idea further by setting his paintings into a dialogue with the specific architectures in which they hang. Through a vocabulary of borders and bands painted directly on the walls he was able to both amplify and subdue the surrounding architectural elements. Now reduced to a consideration to leave an abundant space above his works, Walsh's sensitivity to his surroundings neutralizes the spectacular ceiling, with its I beams and unfinished wood.

What's refreshing about the current exhibition are the stretches and unexpected curves as his parameters broaden and he comes to terms with both his acquired facility and a changing climate. Walsh is still struggling to make a painting; in this body of work as he resolves familiar problems in unfamiliar ways that consequently open up new areas for investigation. Lots of bright colors are set in subtle and complex relationships to one another to create light in the fields underneath them. It's an effect that gives rise to the feeling that the point of entry in Walsh's painting is from the inside out, to be found by following the light coming from the luminous field below through to the hand drawn structure on the paintings surface.

The main room is full of pairs of canvases hung at various distances from each other; the two paintings forming the diptych *Blind touch*. Across from it the red squares of *Red Diptych II* are positioned some inches apart, so that shadow lines cast from the overhead lights almost touch. These shadow lines being much the same as the grey bounding lines in the paintings themselves have the effect of extending the bands from the painting to the wall and create a play on Walsh's earlier investigations of the dialogue between painting and architecture.

The dual nature of this pair seems to dominate the room, one retreats spatially as the other projects forward. One seems to advocate the primacy of line, the other of shape. Both are subsumed in the power of their redness, yet it's a cool move. If a red could be unemotional

and detached Walsh has found it.

In this context what seems at first to be a pair of grids, one white and one black, hang far enough apart from each other on the back wall to announce their likely autonomy. The oppositional tension between them lasts as long as it takes for the color in these paintings to start to emerge from the initial sense of them as black or white. It creates the awareness that our perception of color is slower than black and white. Finally, it's the checklist that confirms each work's actual autonomy.

On the left the white one, *Arrangement*, becomes a pale grey green ground with a grid lattice of blue lines. From a distance blue crosses start popping out at the intersections while the rest of the line falls in with the Burberry colors: a deep English red and then at closer range a yellow that seems to glow from around the edges of the center boxes located inside the grid's lattice. If Walsh's works could be said to be about anything, this one speaks of the quotidian, opening a space to experience the momentary pleasures in life, those that are soon forgotten, yet create the character of our days.

The black grid too, pops crosses at its intersections and with this plastic movement they both recall Mondrian's plus and minus paintings. Yet what finally becomes apparent here is an exquisite combination of black lines on a pale pink ground with forty-two earthy green squares. From certain angles a shimmering iridescence configures from the combination of black and green, an effect that becomes illusionistic when the central green squares are underscored by a red brick 'foot' pushing them back from the grid's black lattice. As the painting unfolds it brings us to a realm of perception that can create the indelible memories forming the bedrock of our perceptual knowing; moments we refer back to again and again as a measurement for what we see. Titled *Ruin*, what it leaves in its wake can never live up to what we once saw in it.

After a few minutes time when all this information has been received, the paintings have individuated much in the way that Walsh's use of the standard forms of abstraction gives him a foundation for articulating his singular vision.

The spacing of its horizontal stripes and their hand painted variance immediately recalls Stella in a painting called *Blind*. Then what clearly emerges from this ochre landscape is the awareness that it's another's hand, not Stella's. Stella's stripes do not quiver and waver the way Walsh's do, holding the light as it moves forward from the underside of the painting to illuminate, in this case, the subtle grey blue border that makes the yellow ground sing as the ochre plays the bass note.

Walsh's sensitivity to one more or less line at the top or bottom of his canvases, or how close or how far those stripes come to his bounding edge, reveals a keen eye for a no-composition compositional strategy. The movement in and out of these seemingly bland fields happens with

almost a sleight of hand. As your eye negotiates structures typically symmetric and static with Walsh's restlessness, it initiates an engagement with the room and makes the paintings seem like they are alive.

Perhaps the simplest painting in the exhibition and the most surprising for me was *Later*, a series of light grey horizontal stripes on a hot pink ground. A sublime and edgy combination, it leaves behind the world of ultra-cool banality some of Walsh's earlier works inhabited. While its vibrating opticality grabs your eyes and won't let go, the neutrality of the grey's horizontality speaks to the body's languor. The grey is so perfectly pitched to the hot pink's intensity that they lock in an unstoppable teetering effect. It's an unlikely pair that like desire and detachment, deceptively offers a pleasure that's hard won if easily had.

Yet it's in a pair of smaller grid paintings, *Recovery* hung at the entrance and *Bright* in the space between the two rooms, that I find Walsh redefining his terms. In *Recovery* a field of matte red squares is rendered uncharacteristically dense when surrounded by a complimentary blue green grid of lines that almost hem it in. The yellow lines painted on top of the red open it up to be seen like screens onto which we could be mediating. Multiplying like mad, these little red squares suggest the proliferation of projections in the 'ever-present' even as they allow us to reflect on painting's long history – Malevich's black square came long before television showed us the Red Square.

*Bright's* grid of hand painted white lines surrounding yellow squares on a baby blue field sent me through a subterranean channel to Nice dreaming of Matisse's *Grande Robe Blue* in Philadelphia. Bounded by orange, lime green and terra verde borders, the effect is an optical sensation that couldn't be more electrifying. When photographed it seems to imitate parallax and make obvious the differing sizes of the barely perceptible shifts in the yellow shapes within the squares that cause the painting to bulge and sway. Yet standing in its proximity, this naturalistic movement, is no longer visible; it is perceived as a felt sense. The space that the painting opens up as a consequence is one latent for reflection and thought, a step towards overcoming the dualism of mind and body.

Is it the pleasure in seeing the experiences Walsh offers that points the way from sensation to sentient? Or is it in rendering the modernist grid as an inhabitable space that Walsh shows the end to materialism in sight? Walsh states his case for allowing abstraction back into contemporary discourse in a dialectical voice.

