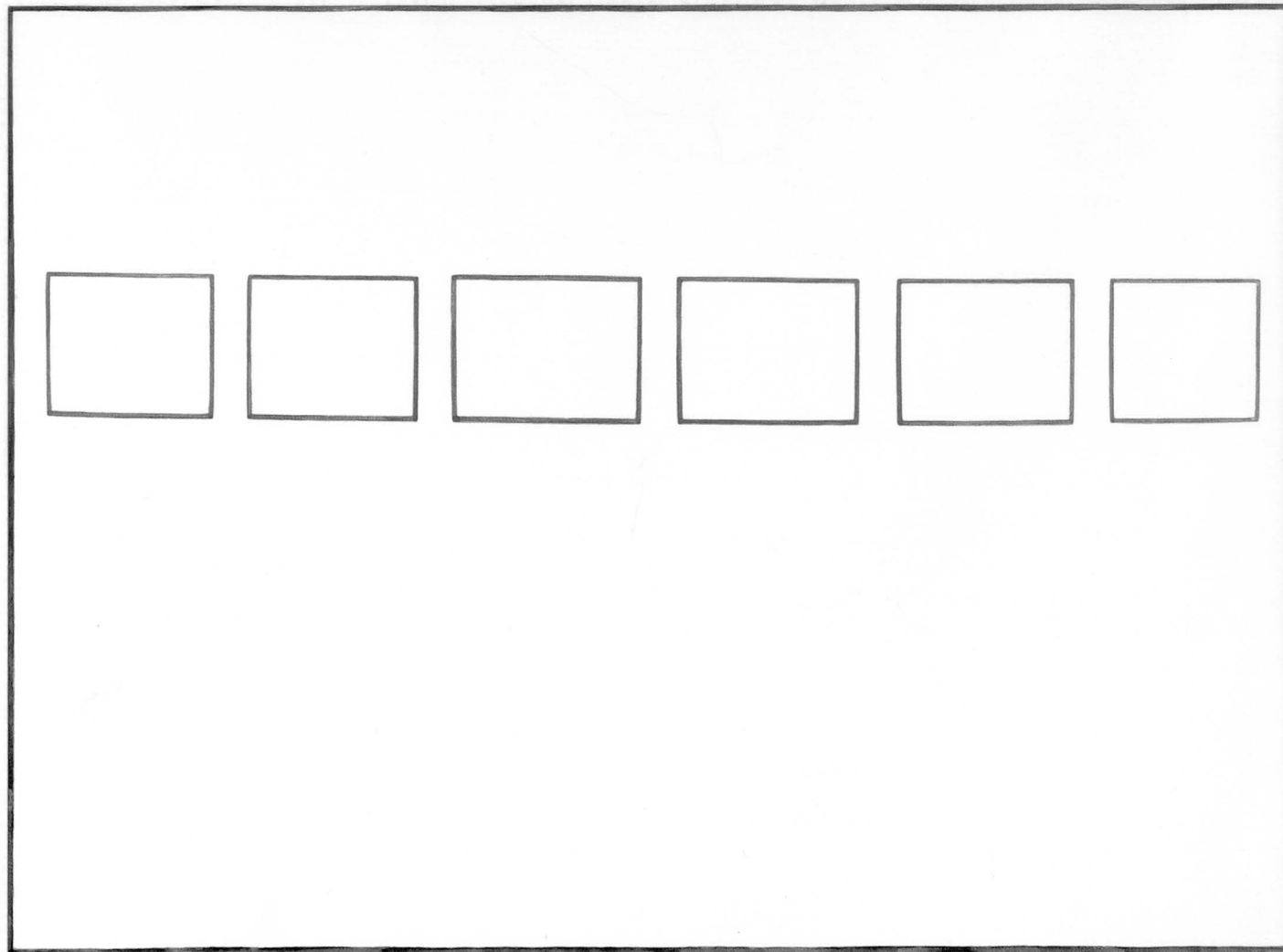


DAN WALSH paintings



The evidence directly before you, a reproduction of a painting by Dan Walsh, contains hand-painted black linear marks the width of a finger journeying across a rectangle and dissecting its interior. They open up the dimensions of the canvas, but not with a grand dogmatic scheme; the movements lack the symbolic thrust of a zealot. The dotted line or soft-cornered square speaks the language of a tough grid, but in a tone that quivers. Some squares set out to jostle the stasis of Euclidean grammar. One square seems to quote the severity of another so as to diminish its neighbor's snobbish sense of superiority. Humor undermines the orthogonal vigor and logic of the geometry. The artist kicks up the murky indeterminacy lingering beneath each geometric puddle and ruptures the assurance with which we name a square or a rectangle a secure structure. The limits of each painting and the specific uses of a linear syntax beckon with equal allure. With no presiding iconic form, a subtle tension accumulates appreciably. The markings on the canvas allow entrance and passage, and sustain the repetition of this pace. The result is an impressive flow of openings and closures, a respiratory pulse that emanates from an alternation of line and white blank space.

The confrontation each stretcher contains is often waged on a white field. The locality of this white plane is indeterminate. This verbal construction you are reading begins on a white support, a page within a publication. The drama of letters and punctuation marks distracts attention from the tone of the ground, the whiteness on which these figures are printed. Walsh's painted geometric vocabulary lives off the stretched, primed white canvases, nourishing itself on the passive pallor. The artist's syntactical forms are amusing to read as they avoid a language, skirting direct meaning or association by emphasizing that they are not even forms; they are only grammatical shapes in a temporary choreography. When shapes or lines languish within the white they stand like solitary punctuation marks, dejectedly or coyly aware that the words – the subject, object, and verb of the sentences they adjudicate and organize – are invisible. Are they a picture, pictures within a picture, or preludes to painting? Where are the marks and forms located, on a plane, on a diagram, or in a language of pure paint? The context eludes our grasp.

Purists of abstraction rebuke those paintings that function as windows as immoral, the *trompe l'œil* a cheap exit for adulterers enjoying aesthetic pleasure. In that mindset, pictorial windows are for cheaters (but then moralizing is second-nature to American art dialogues). In the 1970s Jo Baer said that in her paintings she was "alluding to the cosmos," but such a generalization seems to hamper, not extend, the significance of the art in front of me. The projections of Dan Walsh's paintings on my apartment wall in the summer of 2001 are adjacent to a window where I see the colored lighting of the Empire State Building. Each night the form is dressed in different symbolic coding. The universality of a symbol evaporates, exhausted after benevolent misapplications. Baer's "cosmos" is transformed from specific quotation to generic text, from the realm of the personal to that of platitude/punch line. Objects in the world are as slippery as the multiple and varied contexts in which we place them. Juggling several contexts simultaneously and losing specificity, a dotted line of lemon yellow, for instance, becomes an evanescent sensation when we do not attend to each - - -

We take our breathing space for granted sometimes and learn the hard way. When Dan Walsh realizes that he is taking the white field for granted, he begins to supplant the premise upon which his post-and-beam syntax is founded. Perhaps white is too easy to deviate from. Perhaps the artist's larger installations, tape drawings on gallery walls, have reduced white to a humbled, if not humiliated state. More recent work does not rely on an assumed white foundation. The lines stew in fields that are now achieved synchronically. The bleached grays and beiges ground the personalities of his geometry, whether the squares are pink or orange, amidst a space of competition. There can be no reliance on the premise of a neutral turf. Spaces mellow to broaden the tonal range. Each painting has its own weather that weighs quietly on the lines and geometry with barometric pressure. Unlike Piet Mondrian, who hated his white pants to suffer the humiliation of being drowned in the reflected green of a summer lawn, Walsh sets his geometrical inquiry in impure and heterogeneous fields of paint. Instead of weakening the footing of his shapes, these tonal grounds up the ante. It is another pragmatic tactic: lest the marks be mistaken for symbols, Walsh takes them into unfriendly territory.

The promise of purity haunts painting, it still asks to be salvaged as an ideal if not as a program. Because American painting has rarely been a comprehensive visual iconography in which the monochrome and the grid prevail, most of it can be described as situational. Painters have mined the success of Pop, extracting allusions and icons in an attempt to retain a foothold in the social sphere, but perhaps there are other, less associative ways to accrue meaning. In its most convincing and meaningful state, contemporary art is "an experience that is mapped out but not socially recognized," in Tony Smith's words. Walsh finds abundant space where abstraction remains vital: in the self-deprecation and humor of a skeptical geometry. He continues to evolve by carefully restraining his imagery from absorbing the most minor assumptions, be it the white of canvas or a page. In the catalogue you are holding, the tension proposed by a painting extends to the page on which it is reproduced. Synthetic new homes are devised for his work, altering via digital design the walls (read: pages) on which the paintings hang. The context is now inflected by the painting, following its lead and serving its needs. His syntax is cumulative, endearing itself as it flexes a nervous energy against each new shape of canvas, yet so individuated as to defeat any reading of a master narrative.

Context is the nagging question, and almost seems to be the real criterion of modernity. The problem, since Delacroix and Ingres, has been the consciousness of the artist feeling imbricated in a larger framework that confines the art. For M.E. Chevreul, the chemist and intellectual who first published his study of the perceptual laws of color in 1828, colors were models for understanding the mind. As Chevreul explains the phenomenon, each printed color must be understood in relation to the color of the ground on which it is printed. Likewise, the brain receives and judges a concept in terms of its antagonism or sympathy to the entirety of a moment. "We still need a horizon," Walsh writes. Whether he is describing a horizon that is intrinsic or extrinsic to the painted surface is an enigma we read differently and specifically within each painting Dan Walsh presents.