

MAY 2014

ARTnews



Artists' First Influences

John Cage:
The Sound of Silence

The Ever-Notorious
Marc Quinn

AIDS in the Art World



David Row

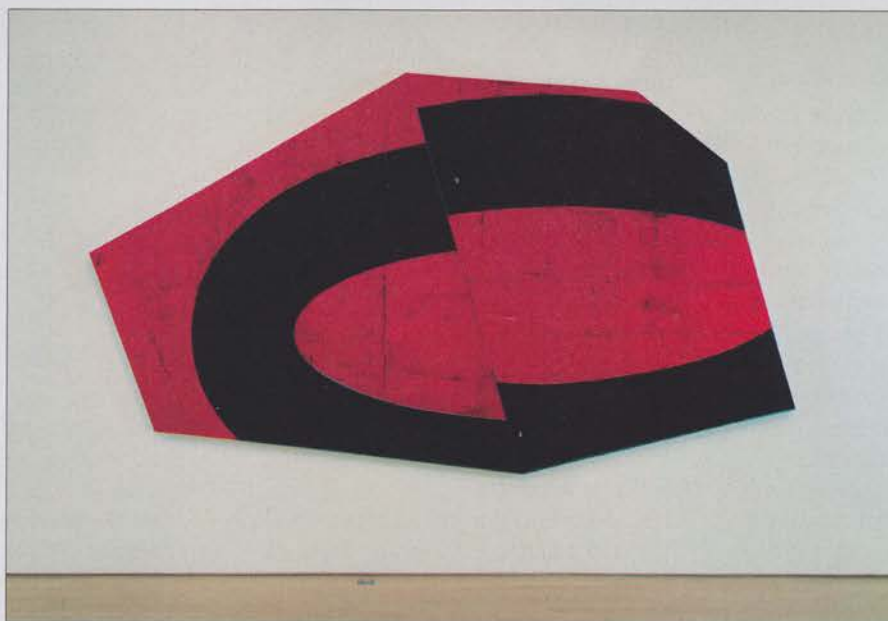
Loretta Howard

"There and Back," David Row's title for his stunning show of six shaped canvases, is mysterious because it seems to refer to a departure and a return. But judging from these irregularly shaped canvases, Row's work has followed a consistent, albeit evolving, course: we know his work when we see it, but it is always new.

And these irregularly shaped canvases confirm it. In Loretta Howard's space, they looked like bizarre Viking shields, clearly intended to attract rather than repel. *Maya* (2014) is a large 51-by-91-inch piece painted predominantly in a complicated, acidic green that Row long ago made into a signature color.

Just visible at the center of the seven-sided canvas is a faint line, a kind of datum plane or horizontal axis. Inscribed left and right of center are yellow-orange vector lines leading the eye up to distant corners. Bisecting the equatorial line is a vertical axis reminding us that the principal tension in a Row painting is between a centripetal motion whirling toward chaos and a grid work that holds chaos in place.

Row's shields could also be aerial views of fortifications, as exemplified by the magnificent *Thingamajig* (2014), a massive 107-by-133-inch, black-and-white composition. The eye travels upward to the remote acute angle at the top of the canvas, as if to a place where it might meet danger. It's all, of course, an illusion, Row's way of fixing the energies of action painting with



David Row, *Pooka*, 2014, oil on canvas, 84" x 148". Loretta Howard.

the discipline of geometry: nature subdued by art, as it is, stunningly, in *Pooka* (2014), where a vivid red threatens to burn down the fortress-canvas but remains restrained by its own form.

Row never left, but he sure is back.

—Alfred Mac Adam

Sam Messenger

Davidson Contemporary

Sam Messenger challenged the accuracy and capabilities of the human hand in this spectacular show of nearly 20 early drawings. In each labor-intensive construction, the British artist employed repeated lines and geometric forms to achieve striking

architectural drawings from 2004, all untitled, Messenger executed a Fibonacci sequence on a meticulous, hand-drawn grid. He began each work by penning four small, right triangles to form a square near the center of the paper. Next to that square, he made another to form a rectangle. In a Fibonacci series, the following number is calculated by adding up the two integers that precede it, so Messenger then drew a rectangle made up of eight triangles, then 12. He continued the series hundreds of times to create painstaking, three-dimensional drawings that resemble structural blueprints. Viewers had to look closely to identify each original square, which multiplied like an amoeba to form something so much larger than itself.

As careful as Messenger is to present precision and mathematical certainty, in each work the limitations of his process could be seen. In the subtle shakiness of a straight line on a grid or the slight variation in thickness from one line segment to the next, the artist proves that even with slight errors, something can still appear to be flawless. —Stephanie Strasnick



David Row: *Concentric Blues* and *Gizmo* installation view, at Loretta Howard, 2014.

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1970s Western cult films, like Alexandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo*.

Unfortunately, the last part of *Cremaster 2* is overly occupied with Barney's tenuous subplot: the unlikely theory that Houdini was Gilmore's grandfather. The film's most witless moments occur in one of its few passages of scripted dialogue—Mailer's nonsensical speech to Gilmore's grandmother.

Overall, with its central story line and high production values, *Cremaster 2* moves Barney closer to film auteur than visual artist. For its effectiveness, much credit goes to Jonathan Bepler's score and Peter Strietmann's cinematography. —Rex Weil

John Currin

ANDREA ROSEN

John Currin's classically inspired nudes, with their high waists, distended bellies, attenuated limbs, and tapering fingers call to mind some familiar figures—Dürer's Eve; Botticelli's Venus; Cranach's women, too; not to mention 17th-century Dutch painting, Mannerist muses like Parmigianino's *Madonna with the Long Neck*, and an Ingres odalisque. The faces, however, are all Currin's: blonde, fresh American. It's a look we associate with high-school cheerleaders and Malibu Barbie rather than timeless beauty.

In the elegantly rendered painting *The Pink Tree*, reaching over six feet tall, two female nudes pose before an overly pruned tree. Its shorn limbs contrast with the nudes' gangly ones. Although one figure assumes the classical *contrapposto* stance, her friend crouches awkwardly. Drawing from different sources—20th-century faces seamlessly grafted onto mannered bodies and set against an ink-black background reminiscent of Dutch painting—Currin creates a gorgeous picture.

Currin gets more contemporary in *The Hobo*, where the Venus cum Valley Girl is clad in bra, panties, and a see-through top, a knapsack on her back and a walking stick in hand. (A companion piece, *Sno-bo*, portrays a similar scene, plus snow.) Currin also digresses, with a couple of banal domestic scenes depicting such activities as two people in a kitchen making spaghetti.

The predominant effect is not one of cool irony. Rather, Currin's figures can elicit empathy from the viewer. For here's a talented and provocative artist caught, or so it seems, somewhere between resuscitating figurative painting and making it his own, even if that means dumbing it down. Whether they derive from ambivalence or irony, Currin's paintings are quite impressive.

—Katie Clifford



John Currin, *The Pink Tree*, 1999, oil on canvas, 78" x 48".
Andrea Rosen.



Richard Patterson, *II*, 1999, oil on canvas, 84" x 65".
James Cohan.



David Row, *Chemistry of Desire*, 1999, oil and alkylid on wood, 48" x 60". Von Lintel & Nusser.

Richard Patterson

JAMES COHAN

Richard Patterson explores a strange territory between Abstract Expressionism and photorealism. Unlike Gerhard Richter, however, who balances abstraction and photorealism by simultaneously producing two separate bodies of work, Patterson manages to conflate the categories, allowing both styles equal time on a single canvas.

Patterson begins by physically defacing a miniature action figure, adding globs of bright-colored paint to the posturing form. This mutant shape then becomes the focus of the ensuing meticulously rendered canvases, every drip and blob captured with the specificity of a photographic image.

In the large painting *Male Nude*, for example, a single figure on a tabletop shoots a weird appendage into the viewer's face. The body is only partially in focus, as happens when miniatures are photographed within the limited depth of field of a standard camera lens. The effect is hallucinatory. Wild swirls of paint are captured with precision, while the figure itself remains fuzzy, slightly beyond our focal range.

Even more challenging is *The Last Detail*, in which Patterson poses the figure by a window looking out on a movie marquee. The messy strokes of color that make up the figure are in sharp focus against the softer background of neon lights that appear in the distance. Patterson handles this composition effortlessly, turning what could have been a tangled junk pile into an intriguing labyrinth of color and light.

Patterson's subject—the miniature men that boys transform into superheroes—could allude to the way art history has traditionally treated "heroic male artists." Patterson has not given up on his own fascination with "greatness." He rises to the challenge simply by aiming to outpaint everyone else, and to the degree that he succeeds, it's a mighty heroic feat.

—Barbara Pollack

David Row

VON LINTEL & NUSSER

David Row's signature oval forms broke deliriously loose in this elegant and animated show. Slaloming over the surface and off the edges of these eleven new paintings and works on paper, Row's fat roller-coaster line takes the viewer on a trip through space. Underpinning it, though, is a complex, geometric framework. Each painting is a diptych, with a vertical seam joining the canvases or wood panels, which are painted different colors or in alternating bands of color running horizontally across both panels. In a sharply contrasting color, the elliptical line starts its journey, but

tracing its trajectory becomes mind-teasing, as it loops over and under itself or shifts tone as it weaves through different color fields.

In *Sidewise*, for instance, a white figure eight, evocative of the symbol of infinity, twines around angled poles on a black ground and continues off sides. The tones reverse themselves though, black on white, across the midsection, creating the effect of positive and negative photographic exposures suggesting alternating universes. This piece is lyrically reprised across the room in *Ovalisque*, a clever abstraction in both name and form. Its composition is a mirror image of *Sidewise*, but Row uses a more highly keyed palette—vibrant orange on deep blue, flipping to blue on a peachy pink-and-white plaid, and back again.

Less monumental but very playful is *Chemistry of Desire*, with two discreet lines—one pink, one white—snaking down each half of the black ground. While never touching, the white drips curve over the center seam, as if to spoon in the arc of the pink, and lower down, the pink moves across the center line to kiss or butt heads with the white. Beautifully, mathematically, almost musically, Row's calculated abstractions let the infinite reign.

—Hilarie M. Sheets



Joseph Stella,
Church in Italy, ca.
1930, watercolor,
gouache, and pencil
on paper,
40" x 23".

Debra Force Fine Art.

tures the sails of fishing boats glowing red on the lagoon beside the Campanile. Whistler's influence was everywhere, not least in a moody sunset painted by Thomas Alexander Harrison and a hazy moonlight view of San Marco by Samuel Coleman.

Among the show's surprises were a charming pastel-and-watercolor landscape by Arthur B. Davies and a delicate minimalist view of Venice as a fragile oasis between sky and ocean by Colorado illustrator Leslie James Skelton. A splendid large watercolor and gouache by Joseph Stella, *Church in Italy* (ca. 1930), sounded the only modernist note in this show in a clear and lovely tone. —Bonnie Barrett Stretch

Wei Dong

JACK TILTON

In the works of Beijing-based painter Wei Dong, flabby women often in states of undress cavort in traditional Chinese landscape scenes or, in interiors, in front of paintings of such images. More than mere exercises in erotically charged absurdity, Wei's pictures are both satiric, symbolic portrayals of China's growing pains and expressions of his childhood fantasies.

In some pictures Wei's women, wearing People's Liberation Army uniforms and looking dissolute and unhealthy, loom large against these strangely sexual dreamscapes, which are always lushly rendered with just paper, ink, and brush. Flesh is doughy and profuse; material falls in luxuriant folds.

Wei's women give his pictures an up-to-the-moment, surrealistic edge. Clothing ensembles such as Mao jackets, Chinese opera costumes, and Western lingerie are completely incongruous. Jarring, too, are the beer bottles, lipstick tubes, and antique back scratchers that are strewn about. The women's strangely sweet expressions are charming, almost disturbingly so.

Surely the most obvious—and provocative—feature of Wei's pictures is that the figures are never

fully naked. A breast is bared here, a buttock revealed there; often no thought is given to trousers. The partial nudity conveys a heightened sensuality, even with blue veins bulging. In the two series "Outing in the Spring" and "Landscape as a Stage," bacchanalian revelry consumes entire classical mountainscapes. These women, with their eccentric fashion sense, are full of surprises. What we don't know, of course, is whether they represent the detritus of the Cultural

"American Artists in Italy"

DEBRA FORCE FINE ART

At the turn of the last century American artists conducted their own grand tours of Europe, just as generations of English had done before them. Italy, especially Venice, remained a major destination. However, unlike many of the English, who purchased vast canvases depicting the Grand Canal from the likes of Canaletto and Francesco Guardi, the Americans were more inclined to paint their own visions.

The scenes of sunlight, water, and elegant leisure in this show may have seemed as nostalgic and fanciful 100 years ago as they do today. But the artists here, both great and obscure, captured moments that will not be seen again.

Probably the finest work on view was John Singer Sargent's watercolor *Oxen on the Beach at Baia, Bay of Naples* (ca. 1902), boasting a rare mastery of composition and technique. But lesser-known painters also weighed in here, most notably John White Alexander, whose *Canal in Venice* (ca. 1879–80) offers a peaceful, intimate, timeless vision. While sketches by Maurice Prendergast and Childe Hassam depict the public places of Venice, William Stanley Haseltine's *Venetian Twilight* (ca. 1883) cap-



Wei Dong, *Two Lonely Women #2*, 1999, traditional Chinese and Japanese inks and pigments on rice paper, 33 1/2" x 26".
Jack Tilton.

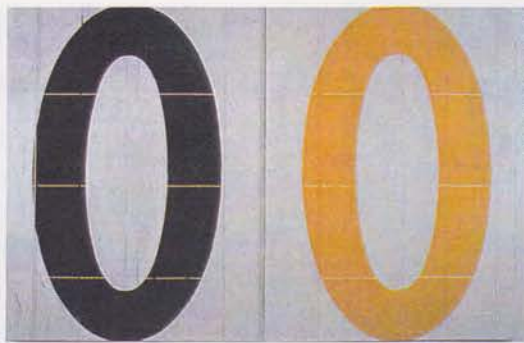
David Row

I'm endlessly fascinated by painting, whether it's hanging in a museum or hanging out of someone's trash," says David Row. He can be as captivated by a piece of sheetrock scribbled on by a construction worker and left leaning against a wall as by a consciously created work of art. The constant visual stimulation is what this 46-year-old abstract painter enjoys most about SoHo, where he has lived and worked since 1975.

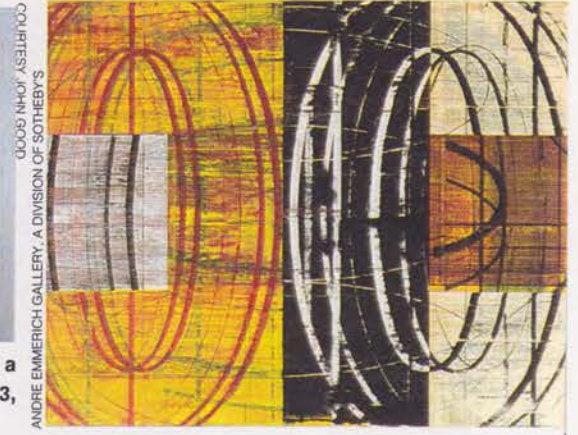
From the Crosby Street end of his loft, which overlooks the former New York City Police headquarters on Centre Street (now co-op apartments), the view of the building's baroque curves bears more than a passing resemblance to the ellipse-filled paintings lining Row's walls. In the paintings, bright orange curves are fragmented by blocks of dark pigment containing other shapes struggling to find space on the canvases. This is the "living" end of Row's loft, which he shares with his wife, Kathleen, and their elusive cats; the "working" end is a jumble of drawings tacked to walls, cans of paint, and canvases in various stages of completion.

Within the past two years, several major events have altered the course of Row's life and career. On the personal side, the unexpected death of his father was a deep emotional blow. On the professional side, he left the John Good Gallery and joined Andre Emmerich, where he had his first show last November. He also exhibited at Galerie Thomas von Lintel in Munich, and he has created a major painting installation in the new terminal designed by Cesar Pelli for National Airport in Washington, D.C., which will open this summer.

In the 1980s, Row was known for his paintings constructed of joined canvases. "I wanted to maintain the link between the painting as a plane and the painting as an object," he says. While he still uses divisions—there are four in his most recent works—Row has set aside the shaping of his pieces to concentrate on the painted surface. Implicit in the sectioning, he points out, is a musical rhythm: four upright rectangles constitute a metaphor for harmony—a precarious phenomenon both in nature and in art. Within the illusory space of the paintings, Row's signature



BELOW Row painting an ellipse, threshold to a symbolic space. ABOVE *Nothing for John Cage*, 1993, 84" x 132". RIGHT *Four Lefts*, 1995, 48" x 60".



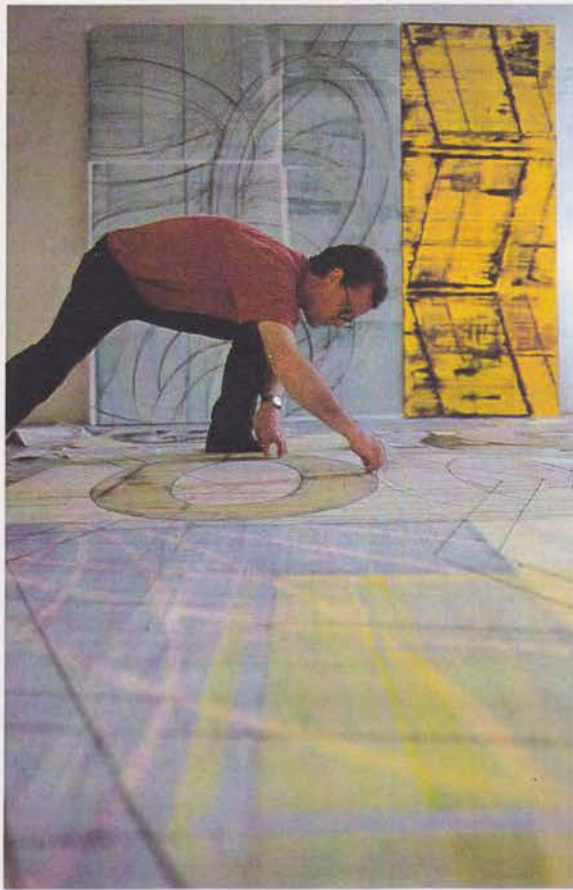
ellipses, whole or fragmentary, whirl in a matrix of overlapping color bands.

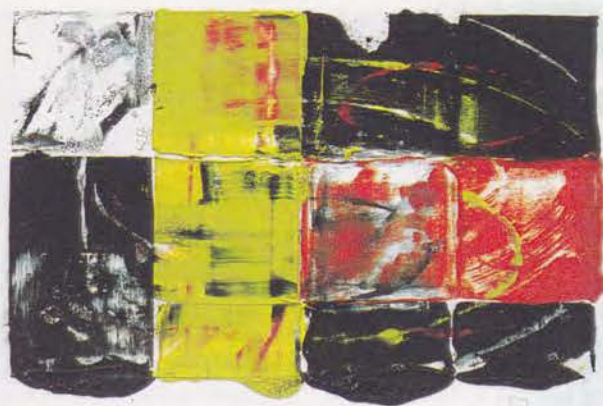
"Complexity is where I am now," he says, looking over his newest work. With their intricate, perplexingly dense surfaces, these paintings mark a transition toward a style in which chance plays a major role, with the artist allowing color and form to grapple with each other and coalesce. Row has reconfigured his ellipse, rendering it horizontal, vertical, bisected, and intersected. But wherever it appears, it is a threshold to the symbolic space of the painted surface, his personal metaphor for dynamism and stasis.

How this New England native, born in Maine in 1951, arrived at a philosophy of tension between opposites has a good deal to do with his biography. Although he grew up in the New Haven, Connecticut, area, it was neither the glaciated forms and muted colors of the neighboring landscape nor the softened sublimity of West Rock, the nearby crag commemorated in numerous 19th-century prints documenting that century's perennial search for the picturesque, that stirred him to paint. Rather, he was inspired by the cacophony of new experiences that he encountered at the age of 14, when he was abruptly transported to Calcutta with his parents (his father was a city planner at Yale University).

The process began with an assault on his senses. He was overwhelmed by sights, sounds, smells, and tactile sensations. "My sense of taste was jolted by spices I'd never known," Row recalls, "my hearing inundated by music whose harmonies were totally alien to me." This esthetic reeducation began with the sensory and only subsequently became a matter of intellect—paralleling the later effect of his paintings.

Row returned with his family to Connecticut after a year.





ANDRE EMMERICH GALLERY, A DIVISION OF SOTHEBY'S (2)

Color and form threatening to go beyond the edge of the picture. LEFT *Untitled* (#390), 1996, 60" x 80" (diptych). ABOVE *Untitled* (#394), 1996, 9" x 12".

When his parents subsequently went back to India, he stayed behind, enrolling at the Choate School in the Connecticut hills as a boarder. His love of ice hockey, which he had been playing since grade school, was an incentive to stay, since there are very few skating rinks in India. He found himself—first at Choate and later at Yale—pulled in opposite directions, between playing hockey and painting. At Yale, his art classes were scheduled at the same time as hockey practice; so, with tremendous misgivings, he left the team and dedicated himself fully to painting.

Row's hockey experience nevertheless held special significance for him. First, the physical parameters of the sport—with its glassy, enclosed playing surface—constitute a series of geometric abstractions, the very kind Row found in the writing of Edwin Abbott, whose fable, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884), concerns the social and sexual life of two-dimensional forms. The rink is an ellipse that the players crisscross to find the angle that will allow them to shoot the round puck into the goal. In addition, explains Row, "hockey requires instantaneous decisions accompanied by coordinated movements."

When Row entered Yale in the fall of 1968, art and architecture there still bore the stamp of Josef Albers (even though the artist had retired officially from teaching in 1960). Since Albers's doctrines were in the air, Row found he had to define himself against them, first as an undergraduate and later as a graduate student. He was encouraged to think for himself by the sculptor David von Schlegell, who insisted that students break new ground rather than follow prescribed models. During his senior year, Row was able to pursue a completely independent program of study. "If I hadn't been given that total freedom to do what I wanted," he says, "I probably would never have graduated." By graduation in 1972, he was in control of his art, both intellectually and technically.

Before completing his graduate work, Row went back to India for a year. He started out in Calcutta, studying Indian music, and then toured the subcontinent in the company of his music teacher. "I found the combination of traditional structures and sanctioned improvisation that characterizes Indian music," Row explains, "in the jazz of Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane when I returned to the United States."

In 1975 Row moved to New York, where he supported himself by working as a "taper," sealing seams between sheets of wallboard. He participated in his first group show in 1978 at the Drawing Center and had his first solo show in 1982 at Barbara

Flynn's Art Galaxy gallery. In 1986 he was in a group show at the John Good Gallery, and a year later he had his first one-person show there.

Row has experimented with various media, but a foray into sculpture for a 1992 show in Hamburg, he says, "brought me back to painting." His three-dimensional objects were a painter's interpretation of sculpture, a kind of solid version of his drawings and paintings, "creating space rather than occupying it." Their uncompromising solidity was ultimately not what he was after. What he wanted was "to take the viewer out of the here and now and into another dimension."

Row's reaction to Albers's concept of color explains how color and space function in his own paintings. In the "Homage to the Square" series, Albers took the view that color has a life of its own, independent of the shape in which it manifests itself. For Row, exactly the opposite is true. First, color is not disembodied but is an aspect of a form; and second, one color may actually "drape" another in such a way that both occupy the same space at the same time. Color, therefore, does not have a constant value in Row's work but changes meaning according to the context.

In the last two years, Row has been experimenting with graphics, making prints with Pace Editions and with David Lasry's Two Palm Press for the Betsy Senior Gallery in New York. What he likes most about printmaking is having to work quickly and make the kind of snap decisions he had to make on the hockey rink. At the same time, the exuberance of graphics has spread to his painting: in his latest work, the battle between color and form threatens to go beyond the edge of the picture and engulf the wall beyond.

Row understands his work as "a series of cycles, all interlocking, all transitions from one to another." His work rhythm reflects this pattern of change and repetition. He makes preliminary drawings, considers his options, and then starts painting—sometimes for a 20-hour stretch—arranging and rearranging until the canvas achieves its identity.

Standing in the working end of his loft—a palimpsest of canvases and drawings—the slim, subdued artist remarks in his characteristically offhand way: "The canvas is the stage where my imagination becomes action and causes the work to disclose itself bit by bit, both to the viewer and to me. I think that's what painting is all about."

ALFRED MAC ADAM

Alfred Mac Adam reviews frequently for ARTnews.