

**Art Papers, July/August, 2006**  
**review by John Gayer**

**Christopher French, Washington**

With the revival of interest in the Washington Color School now underway, the idea of showing new paintings made of dots, circles, and squares initially struck me as a way to capitalize on a trend. What better complement to Gene Davis' stripes of the 1960s than to exhibit works echoing Larry Poons' systematic musings, Victor Vasarely's optical effects, or Robert Irwin's hives of dots? But seeing Christopher French's exhibition *New Paintings: Contradictory Resemblances* [ Marsha Mateyka Gallery, April 8—May 20, 2006 ] changed everything as his lack of compliance with the tenets of such predecessors quickly hit home.

The initial surprises came from the compact size of French's images and the materials out of which they are made. Most of the dozen exhibited paintings were less than two feet square. As such, expectations of any of the effects associated with large-scale works were clearly dashed. Up close, one sees that the composite structure of French's work takes them into the realm of collage—he typically adheres Braille paper to linen or wood panels. The grids formed by the lines of raised dots in the paper also impart an unanticipated tactile quality of the paintings' surfaces, thus suggesting that they may be enjoyed by touch as well as sight.

Standing back from the paintings, one becomes preoccupied with the range of color, the sizes of the circles, and finding a key to the work. The earliest painting, *50-50 Proposition in 3/4 time, 2004*, is the only one that offers a literal representation. By means of its title and visual organization, it evokes a musical score. Here, the array of circles implies loops and curlicues that intimate notation or an electronic visualization of sound.

In other paintings, the dense deployment of circles reminds one of the "vanishing" and "transformation" plates utilized in color vision discrimination tests. Such an analogue reinforces the will to find an image lodged within seemingly random arrangement. The inclination to squint arises frequently, but all attempts to decode the visual information continue to confound the viewer. In some works bright tones, such as pink and turquoise, pulse against a monotone background. In others, mottled paint handling contrasts with opaque round forms. *Desirable Incognitos, 2006* and *My Name is Red, 2005*, exhibit color families of yellow and red, respectively. Equivocal references to game boards, maps of star clusters, spray patterns or the punch design on gilded icons may all be made.

Ultimately the paintings force one to see them for what they are: intricate explorations of color, texture, and form. French combines the seemingly disparate forms of circle and square in ways that simultaneously connote harmony and contradiction. The square within square format that founds these pieces is expressed spatially in low relief through the physical layering of components and the presence of prefabricated deformations in the paper. Though the juxtaposition of circles conforms to the planar network, logical arrangements with regard to color or size are nonetheless absent. In contrast to the squares, the color circles express space visually by advancing and receding. Some appear to float in front of the background color. Others sink into it. Bridging the two shapes are the raised dots and the horizontal and vertical brush strokes evident in many circles. The former echoes the rows of circles, the latter evokes the x and y axes of the grid.

It may seem a tedious exercise to analyze the paintings in this fashion, but this is also what makes them so interesting. The ways in which French integrates opposing forms, applies his colors, and uses a text-based material for its visual impact produce a complex visual interplay that entralls both the eye and the mind.