

and ears stopped. Ignorance is essential. It is too demanding really to learn anything, particularly from the work of very gifted people. Think about the acclaim for tepid abstraction ladeled out in the late 1980s, or about current proclamations of the "renaissance" of painting, and you understand how important ignorance has become. But the Chinese knew better. They knew the past contained the seeds of true originality. A student might spend a lifetime copying fifteen characters rendered by another hand, making progress toward expression by inner discovery and self-competition.

People from the provinces know better, too. Or so I like to think. Maybe, as a provincial myself, I exaggerate their virtues, but Jeff Way came to New York from Ohio in the 1960s for the same reason provincials have always come to the capitol — to see the great work, to confront authority, to learn. So Way pondered first Rothko and Still, then Poons, Olitski, Noland and other "second generation" abstractionists. He gave them his full attention, and it shows. Just before I saw this show, I happened to be at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College. I wandered into the permanent collection and ran straight into a wall of huge Noland's iconic chevrons — on the one side, on the other, Olitski's pulsating curtain of purple red from 1966 titled *BEYOND BOUNDS*. My eye oscillated between sharp edge and liquid form, between constraint and spontaneity. I had everything I could want in painting.

Way unites these polarities in single images. Out of his attention to precursors has come originality. Two of the paintings are sister images, and the longer we look at them the more principled and

oriental they become. Way made them by first scattering powered pigment on canvas, small explosions of color. Then he sprayed the whole lightly with a color, green in *Easter PAINTING, 1970*, for example. The first pigments bled through, and they appear, as in the legend of the Buddhist master Kukai, to be written on the water. Against this evanescence, Way imposed constraint, scoring faint lines of pigment across canvas. The lines appear and disappear, creating glimpses of the moment of transition from matter to atmosphere, from flatness to depth. Like classical Chinese painting, these images aren't meant to be read as integrated wholes but as a succession of perceptions.

In the third painting, *UNTITLED, 1971*, a large canvas in maroon, copper and bronze, Way becomes even more concise, uniting spontaneity and constraint in the single gesture. He devised a way of applying dry pigment in horizontal lines so that it exploded when it hit the canvas. With each subsequent overlay of lines in different colors, the pattern grew richer, the accumulating texture more opulent. The linear patterns are almost but not quite uniform. It's as if Klimt had designed the graphics for an oscilloscope. Yet this opulence has a dry transparency that seems almost impossible — and endlessly worth contemplating. It is not merely "historically interesting," and it points up again why painters have always (until recently) studied other painters — because there are things to be learned.

And there are states of being to be achieved. I spend this effort here to describe his process because process is philosophically important to most varieties of abstract painting and for its appreciation. I also do it because the experience of these abstract paintings is valuable not simply in and for itself (whatever that means), but because of what they grant us in terms of vision.

These paintings open us to the fundamental qualities of things, to the unified polarities that constitute yin and yang, if you will. To me, such knowledge is liberating. It was written of the fourteenth century painter Huang Kung-Wang that he was the first to express a feeling of joyfulness in painting. Jeff Way is another.

There is a fourth painting in the exhibition, from 1993, tucked in the back room, and its presence here poses a problem. Not for what it is — a striking, photo-based acrylic that pushes a composite image to the limit of contrast, until it starts to break up into continents of color and reconstitute itself. It's a problem for what it indicates about the ultimate effectiveness of the Gallery's strategy. It says that this artist is still making powerful work of a different kind, that

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