

and/or porous texture. She then draws on the surface in oilstick dipped in wax, or scratches images directly into the wax itself.

On this white field Friedberg inscribes her "visual poems," as she calls them, her distant recollections suspended in time. Like pictograms, these images beg to be "read," despite their relative indecipherability. For instance, in *Red Cross* a silhouetted figure lies horizontally on a tiny table; below it floats a red cross, and below that an outline of a boat is scratched into the surface. The image is ambiguous, and there is an otherworldly quality to it that leaves one wondering if the figure is rising toward heaven or drifting to the underworld in Charon's boat. This discursive quality, in which meaning is perpetually deferred, is also visible in *The Chosen One*. Here, nine black chairs of varying sizes are lined up side by side. At the center of the composition is the smallest chair, with a red seat, placed beneath a shower of red flecks shooting up to (or down from) the sky. Certainty is again denied. Assuming the title refers to the chair, for what has this "one" been chosen?

While Friedberg's work has always been about the fragility of life, in "The White Paintings" that frailty seems to have been accepted. For example, in *Age of Innocence* a child rendered in

silhouette jumps down or falls from a horizontal beam (or monkey bars); below lie spikes upon which the child might be impaled if s/he isn't careful. But the artist's newfound equanimity has her offering up nonthreatening, horizontal spikes to the right, along with geometric structures which help stabilize this otherwise chaotic and ostensibly frightening composition. Friedberg's new yin/yang approach to life and overall sense of resolve are bodied forth, marking a turning point in this artist's lengthy career.

—Maura Reilly

Will Barnet at Tibor de Nagy

This exhibition sampled the abstract work of Will Barnet, an artist known today largely for his figurative painting. There were two sections—oil paintings dating from 1948 to 1965, and small works on paper from 1949 to 1963. In light of Barnet's support of the abstractionist cause during those years, his subsequent return to figuration, which he once considered outmoded, is conspicuous for its element of surprise.

What links all Barnet's works is a reliance on firmly outlined areas of color. Unlike other hard-edge abstractionists, Barnet does not seem to have been seduced by geometry; nor was he interested in abstraction's expressionist potential. The forms in his paintings, whether circular, rectangular or triangular, are painted and composed in a controlled, reserved manner, yet they always have a handmade quality. Barnet lays down paint sparsely, sometimes allowing the weave and color of the canvas to show through. Shapes do not ordinarily overlap, however, an impression of dimensionality is created by a pulsing of spaces and surfaces. Often, an image is sectioned off in its own compartment.

The oil paintings shown varied in format, the largest being the latest, *Eden* (1964-65), which measures 88 by 43 inches. The earliest painting, *Self-Portrait* (1948-49), shows the influence of Pacific Northwest Native American decorative motifs, with its recurring sawtooth pattern and curving oblongs in the lower portion of the canvas, painted in muted earth tones. These

elements are countered by the modernist severity of rectangular areas in white and dark blue. Perhaps most intriguing is a figure that looks like an upside-down question mark, painted red and brown, which hovers enigmatically near the center of the piece.


Several of the small pieces (sketches which combine gouache, watercolor, ink and pencil, often done on gallery announcements and letters) were studies for paintings, although none corresponded to a painting in the exhibition. One, reproduced in the catalogue, showed that Barnet kept quite close to the studies in his large-scale versions. In most cases, there was more detail in the small works than in the generally spare paintings. Barnet's aloofness is his most compelling visual quality, and it comes across more effectively in the abstract work than in his more famous figurative essays.

—Vincent Katz

Cleve Gray at Berry-Hill

Now 80, Cleve Gray continues to make paintings that defy easy categorization, mixing romantic impulse and classical restraint. While Gray came of age as a painter during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, his works have always maintained a balance and poise, formally and emotionally, that remove him from excess even when he employs large gestures. One senses that formal discipline and craft are his most cherished assets.

Perhaps best known for the grand *Threnody* (1973), a suite of darkly elegiac abstract paintings conceived in response to the Vietnam War and commissioned by the Neuberger Museum at SUNY Purchase, Gray has regularly pursued a cultivated sublime. His new works, large acrylic-on-canvas paintings, were inspired by his ongoing interest in theories of cosmology, according to gallery




Cleve Gray: *Ascension #4*, 1997, acrylic on canvas, 70 by 55 inches; at Berry-Hill.

information. They consist of organic forms that are atmospheric, yet carefully defined by sharp outlines, which float against grounds of pure color.

Part of a series titled "Ascensions," the new works show a practiced but never facile command. The central image, composed of gently rounded shapes that interlock or overlap, can perhaps be read as a cluster of astronomic objects or systems that are joined not so much by nature as by Gray's inspired manipulations. These are by no means objective reports, but scientific knowledge grown into poetic statements. *Ascension #2* (1997), for example, is a triad of translucent deep-red shapes that join forces in a circular center area where overlapping results in opaque rather than atmospheric color. The shapes seem to hang in open air—against a brushy blue ground—while a dark-blue band stretches along the bottom of the painting. The composition, addressing its titular subject, describes a rising movement. In *Ascension #4* (1997), four rounded orange forms are set against a lustrous red with a horizontal band of turquoise blue acting as a compositional anchor at the base.

Even as they imply reference



Will Barnet: *Eden*, 1964-65, oil on canvas, 88 by 43 inches; at Tibor de Nagy.

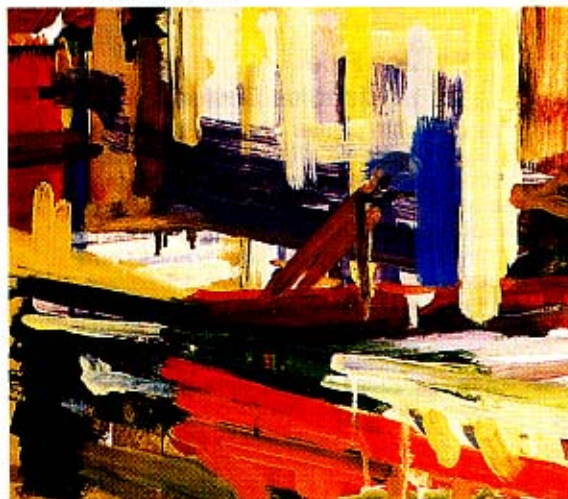


Joe Fyfe: *Marfa Painting*, 1998, oil on linen, 48 inches square; at Nicholas Davies.

smallest 10. He does his best work in the large canvases, though he is equally successful in the medium-sized *Cheney*, a balanced composition in sensuous hues of teal, jade, fluorescent white and persimmon. In most of the works, he uses a lightly loaded brush of rather dry pigment, thinly applied so you can partly read the underpainting. The result looks like printed silk in translucent layers.

Some of these paintings are reminiscent of pattern abstraction, with the difference that Fyfe takes his cues from the exuberant color and design of tribal art. I thought of the painted village architecture of the Ndebele in South Africa, and of kilim carpets. Most striking in this regard is *Unlit Cigar*, which sections the picture plane into eight painterly rectangles, the largest a tobacco-brown panel at the upper left, poised against another at the middle right in which a green X has been laid down over mixed hues of

Juan Iribarren: *Roof Line*, 1998, oil on linen, 14 by 16 inches; at GAGA.



ocher and ketchup. A small white square is foregrounded almost exactly at the central crossroads of the composition. This is one of the few works in the show that is all surface, with no visible underpainting.

In an altogether different mode are the two large canvases based on stripe patterning, the blue-and-white *With Molly* and the red-and-white *Marfa Painting*. These works reach back through Sean Scully's painting to Jasper Johns's American flag, but their surfaces are entirely given over to rectangular ranks of stripes, some vertical, some horizontal, and you glimpse a different arrangement of stripes in the underpainting. Fyfe's stripes are hand-drawn, not hard-edged, and, rather than prison bars and uniforms, they bring to mind awnings and summer beaches. His stripes overlap in ways that introduce foreground-background ambiguities, and they elbow each other in a sort of eight-to-the-bar bebop pulse. Fyfe wants to find a visual equivalent to jazz, as another work's title, *Monk Plays Ellington*, suggests. And he does. The general effect of these paintings is upbeat and sunny, with no heavy-weight "message" beyond the simple pleasure of looking at them.

—Alfred Corn

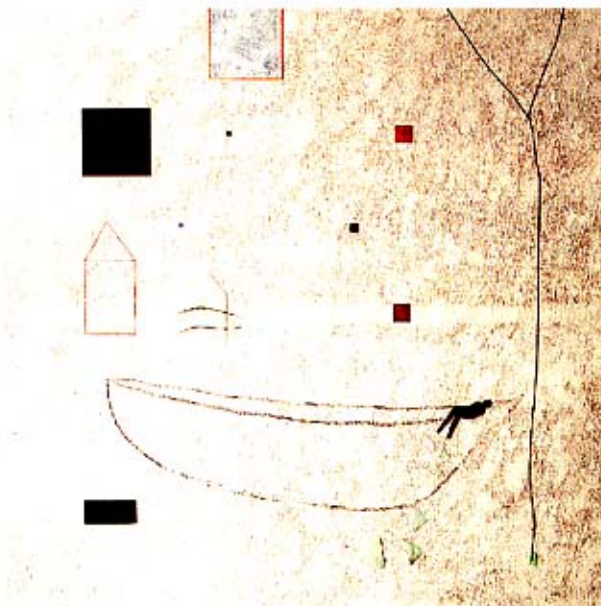
Juan Iribarren at GAGA

For his New York solo debut, this 42-year-old Venezuelan-born painter exhibited 10 small abstracted cityscapes. The paintings are composed almost exclusively of straight, banded brushstrokes in intensely contrasting colors. Yet their cubist facture did not prevent each painting from seeming responsive to a specific view. All except one were painted in 1998 after Iribarren had moved to a ninth-floor studio overlooking downtown

Manhattan streets. Whereas his previous work had seemed completely nonobjective, these new paintings feature diagonal bands crisscrossing and jutting in front of one another, suggesting oblique views of building scaffolding and street-canyons. They continue the tendency of recent abstraction away from flatness.

Iribarren's color, too, is non-descriptive, but also very tonal and suggestive of light and atmosphere. An untitled painting, at 24 by 17 inches the largest and most complex work shown, weaves very dark

ably scaled paintings with unremarkable subject matter. And in comparison to Frank Auerbach (also showing concurrently at Marlborough), who paints abstract landscapes with broad, banded strokes that are worked to the point of gloominess, Iribarren's brushwork has a more liquid, translucent clarity. Looking through catalogues and cards from Iribarren's six earlier solo shows in Caracas, one sees him experimenting with many variations of this banded stroke, both abstract and representational. This



Rachel Friedberg: *Shards of Glass*, 1998, encaustic on wood, 6 feet square; at E. Peterson.

mauve and olive strokes around an off-center area of bright yellow, pink and light blue. These typically contrasting lights and darks are modulated by turquoise and lavenders that recall cloudless sky and light-suffused shadows, and a bold orange that punctuates the composition. As strongly keyed (and as beautiful) as Diebenkorn's, his is also a palette with which a young Monet would have been comfortable.

Another painter, David Kapp (showing concurrently at David Beitzel), is already known for abstracted aerial perspectives on Manhattan streets. Where he re-energizes heroic Abstract-Expressionist scale and gesture with fresh realist motives (such as Manhattan traffic), Iribarren creates more formal, comfort-

modest focus could easily remain academic, but here it seemed, like Morandi's self-limitation, intensely self-absorbed and convincing.

—P.C. Smith

Rachel Friedberg at E. Peterson

Rachel Friedberg's series "The White Paintings" (1997) is extraordinary not only for its formal innovations but for its overall exuberance, especially in comparison with the brooding quality frequently encountered in her earlier work. Utilizing wood panels and the ancient technique of encaustic, in which powdered pigments are suspended in a wax medium, Friedberg builds up the surface of each painting layer by layer—the result being a translucent "skin" with a worn, pitted