

Dennis Ashbaugh



Dennis Ashbaugh's recent works are big, aggressive, dynamically shaped canvases painted in basic and unmodulated colors. On their most immediate level, they deal with such classical painting concerns as figure-ground relationships, spatial and tonal illusion, and implied movement on a two-dimensional surface. Composed of bulky geometrical sections of canvas (up to six inches thick) that are bolted together, they elicit the visual, temporal and corporeal responses of sculptural works. They create in the viewer sensations of mass, density, volume and physical presence. Nonetheless they remain paintings, planar and two-dimensional; for all their thickness, they cannot be walked around.

For several years before and after Ashbaugh moved to New York from California in 1970, he made large, poured-resin paintings which seemed almost diametrically opposed to the work shown here. In the resin pieces, color areas and the edges of the painting itself were determined by the pouring process. In the new work, however, the intensity and proportions of color determine the geometrical shape the color takes. Whereas the surface of the earlier works was that of the resinous material itself, Ashbaugh now insists upon maintaining neutral surfaces throughout the painting to accentuate differences of color and shape.

Another important feature of his work is the nongraphic use of linear elements. He underpaints with a single color, in this group white, black, ultramarine blue, green and brown. Barely perceptible traces of the undercoat are left at the edges of a shape so that an edge can become a color vibration, a division, a shadow or a directional force.

The balancing of clear, basic color against larger areas of black or white relates Ashbaugh's work to the Constructivist aesthetic of the Russian painters of the early 1900s. The predominance of brilliant, limpid blues, reds, yellows and greens recalls Malevich's Suprematist compositions prior to 1920, while configurations of which an entire painting is composed—bars, squares, rectangles, triangles, circles and their parts—also suggest aspects of the work of Tatlin and Lissitzky. Despite these historical affinities, there is nothing traditional about the effect of Ashbaugh's paintings; he does not share Malevich's concern with transcendental values or Tatlin's obsession with construction, and he eschews the randomness and formal rigidity of Lissitzky's images.

More appealing to him than the formal aspects of the Constructivists' work are the social, cultural and political stance and life-styles of these artists in their own milieu.

Though Ashbaugh does not necessarily see his work, or himself, in these terms, he is interested in the clarity of the Constructivists' definition of themselves in relation to a contemporary audience, and the integrity of their work within a political context.

Ashbaugh's desire for clarity—precision of form, color, placement, relationship of parts—gives his work an explicitness, confronting the viewer with unequivocal visual elements that are, in fact, the elements of painting divorced from a meaning or context outside the realm of painting itself. The work highlights its own physical context, energizing not only the wall on which it is situated, but the planar and volumetric aspects of the room itself. By asserting itself as pure painting and denying another context, the work paradoxically insists on its own presence and acknowledgment in the common territory or space we all occupy.

The overwhelming size and energy of these paintings amounts to a physical force, both encompassing and directing the energies of the viewer. Certain works which stress horizontal or diagonal elements also prompt physical and optical movement in various directions along the planar surface as well as toward and away from the walls on which the works are placed.

Intuitive physical responses to the work are also generated and buttressed by the congruence of color and geometric form; that is, color does not occupy a space or an area, it *is* that area. The optical aggression of red, for instance, gives that part of the painting a specific distance in relation to its other parts. Moreover, in places where there is a long, rectangular bar of color, it acts as a vector, creating directional movement that is sudden, fast and unpredictable.

These paintings have an immediacy and brashness, and an attractive uncompromising quality. They are aggressive and mute, solid and quirky. Surprisingly, these antithetical characteristics seem to meld with observation, so that the visual velocity of the pieces is a result of their being grounded and heavy. Likewise, their illusionistic interplay of light, shadow, color and tone results from their thickness, their tangible bulk. It is, ironically, the very straightforwardness of Ashbaugh's paintings that seduces the viewer into a lengthy, sensuous and intricate dialogue with them.

Marcia Tucker
Curator

Catalogue

Measurements are in inches, height preceding width.
All works are lent by the artist.

Oil on canvas:

1. *Agitreklama*, 1975, 108 x 222
2. *Dlya Detyey*, 1975, 108 x 120
3. *Dvookhlyetni Gud*, 1975, 108 x 177
4. *Torgovaya Reklama*, 1975, 108 x 122
5. *Zrelishchnaya Reklama*, 1975, 108 x 180

Oil on paper:

6. *No. 1*, 1975, 32 x 48
7. *No. 2*, 1975, 32 x 48
8. *No. 3*, 1975, 32 x 48



Dennis Ashbaugh

- 1946 Born in Red Oak, Iowa
1969 M.A., California State University, Fullerton
1970 Moved to New York City

One-Artist Exhibitions

- 1970 La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, California, Recent Drawings
Jack Glen Gallery, Corona del Mar, California, New York
1971 Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California, Recent Work
1972 Galleri Ostergren, Malmo, Sweden
1973 Tower Gallery, Southampton, New York

Selected Group Shows

- 1967- Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach California, Southern California Painting and Sculpture Annual
68
1970 Jack Glen Gallery, Corona del Mar, California
1971- O.K. Harris Gallery, New York, Annual Invitational Painting Exhibition
72
1972 Aldrich Museum of Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut
Henri 2, Washington, D.C.
1975 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1975 Biennial of Contemporary American Art

October 9—November 9, 1975

Whitney Museum of American Art

945 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10021

Cover: *Dvookhlyetni Gud*, 1975
Photograph by Dan Perlmutter