

Baltimore City Paper

Timothy App: MICA professor Timothy App uses simple forms to evoke imagery both universal and personal

May 22, 2013

By Marcus Civin

The Aesthetics of Precision

Through May 26 at American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center

Through May 29 at Goya Contemporary

Ohio-born Baltimore painter and MICA professor Timothy App celebrated a milestone this year, with two concurrent retrospective exhibitions, together titled *The Aesthetics of Precision*. The exhibition at Goya Contemporary in Baltimore, on display through May 29, surveys App's works on paper. The American University Museum in Washington, D.C., features the paintings on canvas through May 26.

App makes geometric abstractions, large-scale acrylic paintings on canvas, and related drawings and prints. He works in series. Most of the paintings are body size or near-body size. He paints in layers.

"The reddish, yellowish, bluish, and sometimes greenish gray forms in my paintings are actually achieved by glazing pure red, yellow, blue, or occasionally green color over various densities of neutral gray," App says. "This pure color over gray is what gives [some of] the forms a taupe or brown feeling."

Through 45 years of painting, App has been unwavering and consistently inspired. Between the two exhibits, there are about 80 works. App articulates highly felt spaces that are careful, brisk, and pulled nearly to quivering. He is fundamentally committed to unsettling or grounding material presence. His work is subtle and immediate, dynamic and open. He paints abstract systems, but his desire to discover the nature of systems in general reveals his desire for a certain freedom.

For "Variable Woodcuts," a series of early prints from 1969, App chose a fixed group of black parallelograms and arranged them in different configurations. The various printed conglomerates are boxy or snaking; they evoke but do not pin down physical realities. See elbows or knees, then see seats or screens, then perhaps see and hear an array of blasting speakers at a concert. In one print, two identical cubes touch at one edge. The cube on the left seems to rest on an implied ground. The cube on the right juts up and out. Only one edge of this second cube touches ground. In another instance, the parallelogram conglomeration looks something like a high-backed bench. Each print records a variable arrangement, marks an abstract decision rather than depicting a recognizable form. Together, these prints pace time, mark a history of decisions.

"Six Systems" comprises two rows of three systems, six ink armies of bit black squares, hand-drawn on a piece of graph paper. One square system seems to bulge out at the center. Another might be receding. Yet another is weighted heavy to the left. One square system becomes two squares. Ultimately, App understands that systems can curtail human freedoms. "Six Systems" is a vibrating presence; these are open systems, not holding patterns.

App's painting "Mayday" loosely relates to the May 4, 1970 massacre of students at Kent State University, where he was finishing his undergraduate studies at the time. This is not a festive Mayday. The deep space in the painting is gray, or gray with a touch of greenish tinge. Ten crisp red, gray-blue, and mustard stripes crisscross the surface of the painting. At the front are

four red stripes: They're vertical and insistent and, App says, stand in as surrogates for the four students killed by the National Guard at Kent State. Behind the red, in the middle, on the horizontal, are the thickest stripes. These three gray-blue stripes are blunt and solid. Three vertical mustard stripes stand behind the blue and against the deep gray. The mustard stripes are sentinels in a Mayday corps. "Mayday" is a close view of a formidable barred window. There is nowhere safe in this Mayday, nowhere outside or inside, nowhere safe in the middle. "Mayday" is a danger sign, a call for help.

The space App defines is flat but offers the illusion of depth. His shapes are puzzle pieces and they are portals or voids. For App, abstraction refuses easy categorization and any tendency to dumb down; abstraction resists insistence on absolutes of interpretation. Abstract painting is independent. Yet, for App, abstract painting is also linked to the present. It relates, if indirectly, to the world and responds to various realities—political or spatial realities, for example.

"In our time and cultural milieu, abstract painting is a subversive activity," App wrote in a 1977 catalogue. "By subversive I mean that it is resistant to the profane biases of a culture in which experience is so often short-circuited by categories and rhetoric. Abstract painting, by its very nature, is immediate."

In App's "Black Paintings" from 1987 to 1997, the rectangular shapes are solid and permanent, yet also feel urgent and immediate, present and a part of this world. The rectangles seem poised. If parts of paintings could move, some of these rectangles and white cubes could slide down neighboring rectangular chutes or across an accommodating channel.

A later painting, the large acrylic on canvas "Monitor," from the "Multiform" series, is composed of partial shapes that together suggest depth. "Monitor" is akin to a computer monitor, a screen, a projection device, and a part of a communication portal . . . or maybe not. A long taupe strip hugging the left side of the painting but not reaching the bottom is like a chimney pipe without a roof or the flapping-in edge of a wayward shutter. Yet the 45-degree angle at the top of this long taupe strip could suggest that this fragment is meant to recall the painting's actual wooden stretcher bar, a fragment of the frame that the canvas covers, that holds the canvas.

"Monitor" is a fact, layers of paint on canvas, and an illusionistic painted space that freely alludes to other kinds of spaces. A pure white cube on the right side of the canvas obscures the side of a brushier reddish-brown arc visible on the left side of the canvas. Perhaps the arc and the cube in this painting work together to block—or to monitor—the dark triangular shape, that suggestive empty space behind.

For App, abstract painting requires careful observation, intuition, sensitivity, assiduous observation, and precision. "Painting is able to function both as a private image, seen from afar, triggering memory and association, and as a public object, beheld intimately and copresent with the viewer as a crafted act made manifest in the conscious world," he wrote for Artweek in 1975.

Freedom might involve seeing systems clearly. Freedom might look like muted pulsing color, crisp-edge variable shapes. Freedom must allow for memory and association. If abstract painting exists in the conscious world, in this reality, freedom could exist in this reality too.