

# Art & Antiques

2 0 0 4  
2 0 0 5



## INSIDER'S GUIDE

The  
Essential  
Handbook  
For  
Collectors



U.S. \$4.99  
Canada \$6.99  
Display until 4/30/05





# Another World

Evaluating and appreciating abstract art.

By Edward M. Gomez

**F**ew fields of art are as varied or, for some, as daunting as that of abstract art. But it is abstraction's multitude of styles, its aspirational character and its penchant for experimentation, its admirers feel, that are among its most rewarding attributes.

## ENDLESS VARIETY

Some viewers may not know what to make of the seemingly formless expanses of all-over color in the canvases of Jackson Pollock, or of the quieter, loosely architectural geometries of the California painter Richard Diebenkorn. Brushier, gestural abstraction may seem like a whole other school of art-making. So can "hard-edged," geometric abstraction, whose sleek compositions of stripes, grids or basic shapes may be inspired by mathematics or machines.

Abstract artists may take a reductionist approach to representing subject matter from the real world,



reducing flowers, people or complex scenes to their fundamental colors, rhythms or forms. Thus, the Romanian-born sculptor Constantin Brancusi distilled the essence of his subject in "Bird in Space," 1932–40; this classic, gently curved column of polished brass is at once subtly allusive and completely abstract.

Other abstractionists have created works that are visible,

Brooklyn-based Karen Arm's "Untitled (Incense #4)," 2004, acrylic on canvas, 66" x 48".

tangible records of the methods by which they were made. (See Pollock's drip paintings, Helen Frankenthaler's poured-paint canvases or Eva Hesse's mysterious resin and latex sculptures.) Then there are the painter Ellsworth



Kelly's monochromatic, oddly shaped canvases and the sculptor Richard Serra's massive assemblages of sheets of COR-TEN steel. Such elegant, enigmatic works are exercises in—and celebrations of—pure, proud, unembellished form.

### BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

With its wide diversity of styles and its ambiguous approach to subject matter, abstract art can leave viewers yearning to know what a specific work or what an artist's entire oeuvre is supposed to mean. Aficionados may savor abstraction's thematic open-endedness. Others may find it an obstacle to fully understanding or enjoying a work. Even if viewers respond positively, they may still find themselves asking, "But is it any good?"



### EMOTIONAL ENERGY

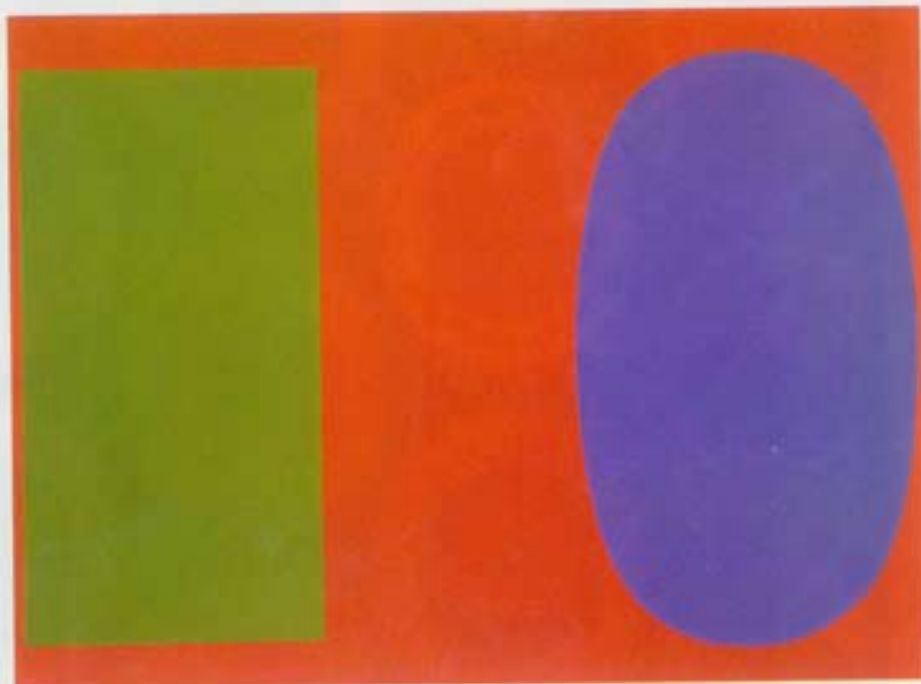
"I've seen a lot of bad abstract art—abstraction for abstraction's sake," says Wendy Snyder, archivist of the New York-based Sam Glankoff Collection. Glankoff was a member of the second generation of post-WWII, New York School of

Abstract Expressionists. The broad, calligraphic brushstrokes and primordial-looking motifs that characterize his monoprints gave them an eloquent, monumental air. Snyder says, "Good abstract art must be emotionally charged, with an unmistakable sense of depth and power you can feel."

"Sometimes it's just a mood" that a work generates and which captivates a viewer, the New York dealer Kimberly Venardos says about abstract art's unnameable appeal. Vernados shows work



Sam Glankoff's "Untitled, 1973," water-soluble printer's ink and casein on handmade Japanese paper, 25 1/2" x 40 1/4". Detail of Jon Waldo's "Henry the Navigator" (top), 2004, oil and acrylic on canvas, 48" x 60".



Ellsworth Kelly's "Green Blue Red" 1963, oil on canvas, 67 1/2" x 90".

by contemporary abstract painters and encounters newcomers to this kind of art "all the time." She observes: "Although many abstract artists do refer to forms from nature in the colors, shapes or patterns they employ, I let clients know this art is wide open to interpretation."

### ABSTRACTION'S ENDURING ALLURE

That artists, art historians and the general public continue to explore the language of abstraction with

curiosity and passion is a testament to its expressive power and enduring allure. For collectors, these trends may signal that well-chosen pieces marked by innovative techniques, compelling themes (check a work's title for clues to its intended historical, literary or other references) or the emotional power that Snyder finds so irresistible will grow in value over time.

"Viewers bring something to the work, too," says Brooklyn-based painter Karen Arm, whose canvases may be read as monochromatic tableaux or, up close, as abstracted depictions of billowing smoke or dense agglomerations of shimmering stars. Abstract painting, Arm notes, is "its own world, as opposed to

realist painting, which a viewer can compare to a known subject. Abstract painting is about the process of painting itself." Jon Waldo, whose canvases mix simple, stenciled line drawings of common objects with all-over eddies of spaghetti-like brushstrokes, says, "With abstract art, you create your own realities. Something about it can be very spiritual, too."

### CURRENT TRENDS

Lately, dizzily geometric Op Art painting of the 1960s and cool, minimalist sculpture of the 1970s are being appreciated anew. Many artists are working with found or recycled materials. Some have rediscovered and are experimenting with older techniques like encaustic, a method of painting with hot wax.

Regional museums, often on college or university campuses, own and regularly show interesting abstract work. New Jersey's Montclair Art Museum, for example, houses a large collection of the Synchronist painter Morgan Russell's art. The Menil Collection, in Houston, has special buildings housing monumental canvases by Mark Rothko and Cy Twombly.

### FIRST STEPS

The literature on abstract art is vast and, in recent years, revisionist art historians have re-examined the standard way in which Modernism's

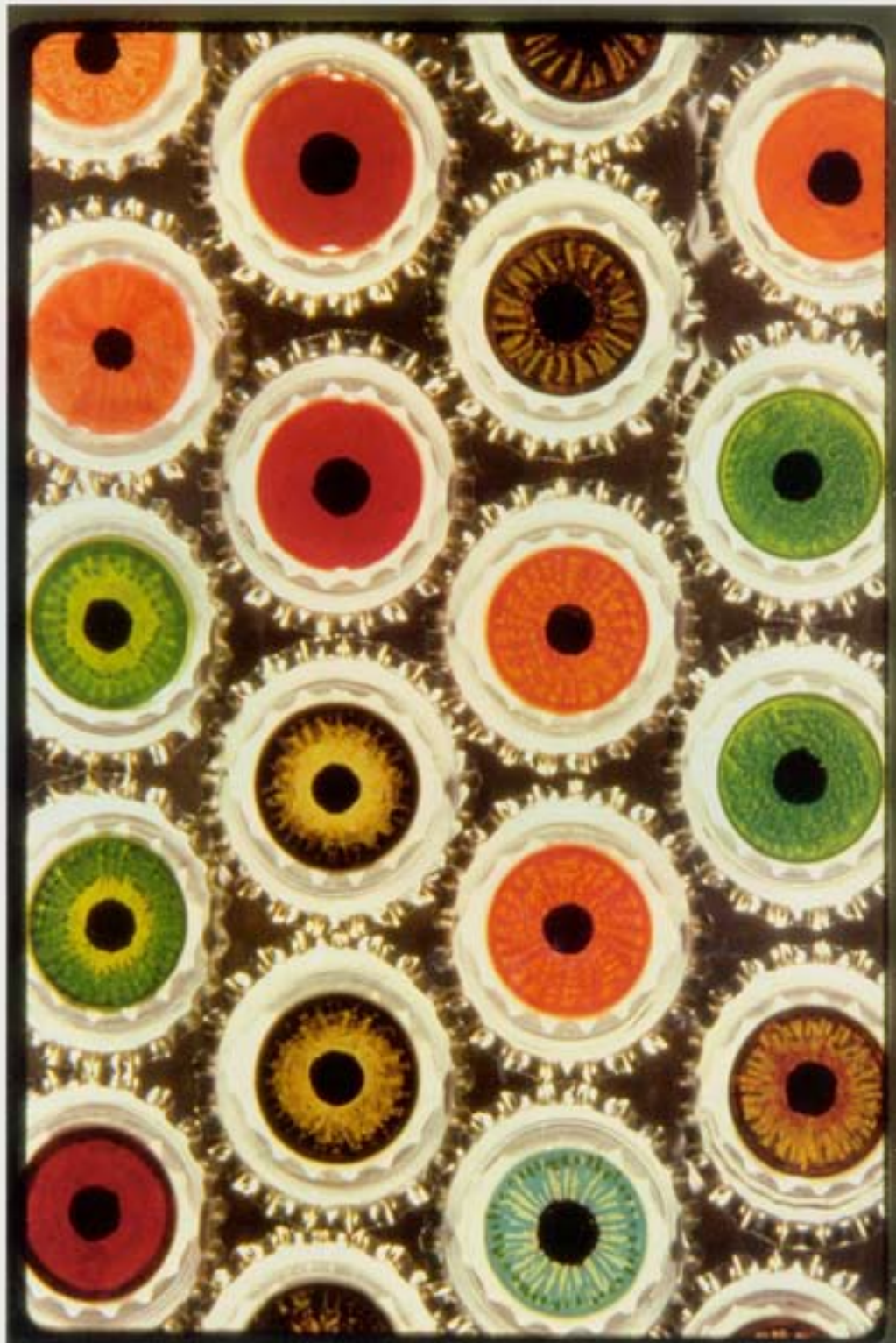


Eung Ho Park's grid of painted bottle caps, "Eyes," 2003, at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

story has been told. Looking at the broader social and cultural conditions in which abstract art forms emerged, they have highlighted such overlooked artists as Norman Lewis, an African-American who worked with the WPA (Works Progress Administration) in the 1930s, and Janet Sobel, who was self-taught.

New York dealer Gary Snyder specializes in such lesser-known, accomplished Modernists, whose work is usually more affordable than that of abstract art's legendary superstars. Often, more of it is available, too. Drawings, prints and works on paper by lesser-known artists costing only a few hundred or a few thousand dollars can provide low-cost opportunities to start building collections. (See Pierogi's Flat Files online.) Mixed-media works and large sculptures can be challenging to install or conserve, but some welcome the dramatic presence such pieces can command.

Exhibitions like the Brooklyn Museum of Art's recent "Open House: Working in Brooklyn," feature abstract art aplenty. Among this big survey's finds: Korean-born Eung Ho Park's grid of painted bottle caps, mounted on board; Danielle Tegeder's paintings



inspired by architectural plans; and Nancy Drew's recreations, in glitter and fuzzy flocking, of canvases by De Kooning and Clyfford Still. Nowadays, no one should feel inti-

midated by abstract art, which has become ubiquitous. Dealers almost always take time to introduce an artist's work and to educate potential new clients. Don't overlook



Laura Sharp Wilson's "Mad Humanity," 2003, acrylic on Unryu paper mounted on wood, 21" x 14".

another free and obvious point of entry into the field—exhibition walk-through talks at museums led by curators and informed docents. □

*Edward M. Gomez, Art & Antiques' New York correspondent and author of numerous art and design books and exhibition catalogs, is a longtime collector of small-format, abstract works by contemporary and self-taught, "outsider" artists.*

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

- **ACA Galleries**, New York. (212) 206-8080.
- **Ameringer & Yohe Fine Art**, New York. (212) 445-0051.
- **Gary Snyder Fine Art**, New York. (212) 871-1077.
- **C&M Arts**, New York. (212) 861-0020.
- **Carl Solway Gallery**, Cincinnati. (513) 621-0069.
- **CDS Gallery**, New York. (212) 772-9555.
- **David Tunick**, New York. (212) 570-0090.
- **Feingarten Galleries**, Beverly Hills, Calif. (310) 274-7042.
- **Forum Gallery**, New York. (212) 355-4545.
- **Jon Waldo Studio**, New York. (212) 777-4838.
- **Kimberly Venardos & Co. Inc.**, New York. (212) 879-5858.



- **Kraushaar Galleries**, New York. (212) 307-5730.
- **P.P.O.W. Gallery**, New York. (212) 647-1044. Artist Karen Arm.
- **Peter Findlay Gallery**, New York. (212) 644-4433.
- **Pierogi**, Brooklyn, N.Y. (718) 599-2144. Pioneering, artist-run

gallery's Flat Files online shows emerging artists' works: [www.pierogi2000.com](http://www.pierogi2000.com).

- **Rhona Hoffman Gallery**, Chicago. (312) 455-1990.
- **Sam Glankoff Collection**, New York. [wendysnyder@earthlink.net](mailto:wendysnyder@earthlink.net).