

The Paintings of Clytie Alexander
1992-2003

Clytie Alexander has not spoken of what her paintings are “about” or what they “mean”. Nor, it seems to me, would such an enunciation of identifiable thematic goals fit into her view of her own work. What she has said is “I do something other than make pictures. I am trying to construct a visual language that is not based on images. The idea is to be able to absorb information from a painting in a random way by evoked sensation. I am not trying to tell you what to see. Make up your own images if that’s what you’re inclined to do.”

The above quote is drawn from a “self-interview”, which was the structural format conceived of by Alexander in creating her (entirely text based) artists’ book entitled “SEEING RED – Notes From A Painter’s Studio”. In it, she discusses at length her painting practice: how she builds a painting, the technique, the dialogue, the absence of goal, and the surprise. She speaks also, in some detail, of landscapes, buildings and cityscapes. From a wide ranging, late 20th Century perspective, she speaks of the *ideas* of American space and the American West, where she lived and painted for many years. She speaks of architecture and the city outside her windows in New York City, where she currently lives and works. These twin American vistas are not the subject of her paintings, just as they were not the subject of those American masters of abstraction who have referenced their work and their sense of pictorial space as being informed by their responses to the American landscape and American space. Rather, these terrains provide her with the textures, the moods, the colors, memories and a breadth of vision to engage in her art. She has termed it “a palate of information”.

Alexander’s lineage as a painter (or her language so to speak) lies securely in the territory of colorfield and minimalist abstraction. When viewing her paintings in the last decade or so, the work of Mark Rothko and Agnes Martin are initially called to mind but it is just that easy, immediate referencing which can so mislead the casual viewer in perceiving how dissimilar and substantially different her work is. Once these initial references recede (or at least move to the interpretive margins) and the viewer is fundamentally freed of them, it becomes apparent that Alexander’s paintings are not as theirs are, intensely meditative in nature. This is not how they work. While repeated viewings allow an observer to

go beyond the strong appeal of their painterly beauty, it becomes increasingly apparent that the experience is not a meditative experience and the work does not elicit a meditative form of engagement. Alexander's work seems to have attained a most unusual balance between being anti-meditative in mood and non-confrontational in spirit.

Though subtle and minimalist in overall style, the works succeed in becoming works of high drama. Whether her canvases are of medium size or quite large, they all offer up a kind of genuine cinematic expansiveness. It is as if, in the far, far distance some magnificent or terrible encounter is taking place; some battle or confrontation has only just concluded. As the dust settles or the smoke clears, as the fog lifts or the heat wave subsides, as nature makes an adjustment, only then do we begin to have a sense of what has happened. Only then do we have a chance of knowing. And each viewer will, if he or she stays long enough (perhaps feeling a little awed and anxious) begin to perceive this drama and frame it in his or her own personal terms.

Alexander employs a wide range of colors and works on paintings over long periods. Generally, in working on several pieces at once, a group of paintings may have a similar palate but never should they be regarded as a series. Her paintings could be broadly described as having shimmering or pulsing or floating horizontal bars or planes of color resting on or within a densely painted colorfield ground. These horizontals are generally close in hue and value to each other while at times varying significantly in their color relationship to the so-called ground. Sometimes they appear to advance and at other times, recede. The lighting and one's angle of vision definitely influence this. In Alexander's earlier paintings, these bars tended to have a stricter uniformity, more subtly interacting with the rest of the paintings' surface, whereas, in works from the mid-90's, they become looser, less stabile, more cloudy in appearance. And now, in the latest works, these bars are much less subdued, some jaggedly broken apart, and, at times, harsh in tonality, as if the distant battle, discussed above, were moving much, much closer to the surface. Also, with these most recent paintings, the horizontals (verticals have made a sudden unexpected appearance) appear less integrated and a figure ground relationship is called to mind. These horizontal bars are a continuing motif and provide the structural element from which each painting evolves or upon which it is built, the result being both natural and architectonic. While this body of work embraces an overall pictorial uniformity (i.e. recognizably a Clytie

Alexander painting), it is important to note that our attention does not get drawn toward her style or technique; the works fully succeed in sustaining their individuality and not blending into one another when recalled. As for their titles, they are freely drawn from “The Mahabharata” yet we are not meant to infer direct parallels.

No hint of representative imagery has found its way into Alexander’s paintings from this period. They remain resolutely abstract while the deeply subliminal narrative quotient with which, for me, this work is imbued, offers us drama of psychic or mythic dimensions. These paintings do not serve to comfort or calm us. While Alexander’s work can seduce us with its beauty - indeed it may be enjoyed on that level alone - it is capable of leading us somewhere if we are at all willing and the moment is right. So too it may be with much of great non-representational art. Such work is not for the speed-reader.

In a field so long and well explored as abstraction, it speaks to the stature and masterly originality of Clytie Alexander’s work that it can produce such a high stakes encounter between itself and the viewer.

Steven Butz
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