



Stewart Goldman: Presence Through Absence

MATT MORRIS // MAR 4, 2009

Solid curating and progressive notions have gone into the Cincinnati Art Museum's new solo exhibition, *Stewart Goldman: Presence Through Absence*, in its Vance-Waddell Gallery now through May 10.

Born and trained as an artist in Philadelphia, Goldman has been a resident of Cincinnati since 1968. For most of the time in Cincinnati, he was a professor at the Art Academy of Cincinnati, and it's not difficult to trace his influence through several generations of artists who attended

the college during his tutelage. My own time at the Art Academy did not overlap Goldman's tenure (he had already retired to focus on studio practice), but I nonetheless recognize a rapport between the principles that drive these works and those that formed the foundations of my own aesthetic beliefs.

The exhibition traces an evolution from representational painting, of recognizable rooms, into the increasingly less certain terrain of abstract painting. But the radical shifts within this one painter's oeuvre don't suggest artistic schizophrenia. Rather, they portray an audacious sense of creative evolution that embodies a response to issues of painting and the society in which he has worked. Actually, from the examples of more than 30 years of painting on display, Goldman might be successfully discussed as both a model for other artists and an encapsulated history of painting in himself.

Goldman's representational works of the late 1970s were painted in a time when abstraction reigned. He, along with a cadre of artists such as Donald Sultan (whose linoleum paintings from this period are now on view at the Contemporary Arts Center), Susan Rothenberg, Philip Guston and local painter Constance McClure, forced images and representation back into their paintings in spite of their unpopularity within the art establishment. In Goldman's case, paintings of the interiors of his house, emptied of nearly all of the furniture, eventually gave way to laconic views of Holocaust gas chambers, such as "Chamber I" from 1981. The inclusion of this stark, planar work — with furnace glow ominously shining across the ceiling of the chamber — charges even the most abstract paintings alongside it with a sense of social conflict.

Goldman's persistent saccharine pastel hues are not the experiences of quietude that one might expect, but are instead arranged in paintings that are at times mesmerizing in their simplicity and tense in their intentional sense of compounded visual crisis. From the outside wall of the room painted a misty teal, to the sherbet orange painted within its arched entryway, back to the wall painting in "Elysian," the gallery hung with his paintings gets drawn into the color language Goldman elucidates. "Elysian" itself makes the wall part of the painting as a grid of small square panels, dappled and streaked with color are spaced across the lavender expanse.

In "Couch" from 1981 (pictured above), pink and robin-egg blue are iced into a minimally depicted interior space surrounding a couch (little more than a rectangle) in the center of the composition. The space appears to be bathed in white light, bright enough to be able to carry the visual weight of a hot orange rectangle painted thickly near the right edge.

If this is a window to the outdoors, why does the color of the light enter the space so palely? The visual ambiguity of the scene is not a problem at all but is rather the kind of poetic license abstraction affords, beholden to Cubism and related to some of the degrees of abstraction found in Richard Diebenkorn's work of that period, such as the museum's own "Interior with View of Buildings."

Goldman modulates the supposed divisions between representation and abstraction. Many of the formal qualities in "Couch" are also found in the much more recent abstract painting "Slope," an oil-on-linen from 2006. The 2-foot-square canvas is mostly a flatly painted field of salmon pink, with a flurry of white and rose-colored shapes banking across the bottom edge of the square. Here Goldman conceives the same eloquently empty space as the rooms he painted 30 years earlier, without the need to anchor the visual experience in a recognizable picture.

It is daring that the museum and Jessica Flores, its associate curator of contemporary art, continue to intersperse contemporary exhibitions that feature vital members of the Cincinnati art world alongside international stars like Ryan McGinness and Mark Bradford. *Presence Through Absence* offers the chance to celebrate a long-term pursuit of aesthetic surprises in Goldman's career and a clear case that painting, especially abstract painting, is a persistently relevant and energetic means to encountering and responding to the world we inhabit.

STEWART GOLDMAN: PRESENCE THROUGH ABSENCE is on view at the Cincinnati Art Museum through May 10.

<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/visual-arts/article/13017795/stewart-goldman-presence-through-absence-review>