

Abstract art explained by UD professor

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an interview by Marie Rafalko

An exhibition of recent paintings and works on paper by UD Art professor Mark Lavatelli is now on view at the Conduit Gallery. The Conduit is located at 2814 Elm Street in Deep Ellum (next door to the Video Bar). The exhibition opened on October 25, and continues through November 25.

Lavatelli's current work is primarily abstract, though many of them contain recognizable images. Recently, Lavatelli was interviewed about the evolution of his art work.

University News: *Years ago, your work was based primarily from nature. What compelled you, as an artist, to paint from nature?*

Lavatelli: Nature is extremely beautiful. The aesthetic experience of nature is as powerful or more powerful than the aesthetic experience of Art. I wanted to recreate the experience of being in the landscape.

After the paintings that contain natural forms, your work became increasingly abstract and geometric. What influenced this change?

I realized that I could never fully recreate the experience of nature in a painting because a painting only addresses vision; and nature affects the total sensorium, all five senses. One is affected by smell, by touch,

and by sounds. I was interested in exploring other things that I could do with painting. I was influenced by the formalist aesthetic which proposes that each art medium should emphasize its intrinsic qualities. Since paintings are flat surfaces, the image should also be flat and thus abstract.

Do you contain elements of nature in your abstract paintings?

Yes, nature continues to be a source of inspirations. Nature is the greatest teacher of color harmony. The landscape paintings I had done before were based on an area of fallen logs in the Sandi mountains near Albuquerque. This place fascinated me because the organic forms [logs] were in a geometric configuration.

Did this dynamism in nature compel you to abstract from what you saw?

Yes, the log patterns were the basis of my abstract work. I utilized the geometric relationships from the landscape setting. Also the geometric paintings contain some atmospheric qualities and textures that came out of nature.

The landscape of New Mexico influenced your abstract paintings. How did your move to Dallas affect your work?

My paintings remained angular and geometric. These configura-

tions relate to the urban environment and the angles of interior settings. My immediate environment does have an influence on my work.

Your current paintings at the Conduit have an increased vitality and have let go the emphasis on geometry. How did this occur?

I turned inward for pictorial sources. I see painting as a fabric of associations in the mind. In the act of painting, a dialogue occurs between what is expressed and a mysterious inner world. This is another way of explaining the role of intuition, which makes painting a continuing mystery and challenge.

You have included organic forms in your recent work. Why is this?

I believe that organic forms more accurately express the life of the psyche.

Also, the new paintings contained a deep rhythmical space.

I felt the need for addition of that complexity. I was tired of making flat paintings. Space was an element that I had reduced in the past. Things that have been discarded can become alive and magical again.

What are the current paintings about?

In the most general sense, the paintings reflect everyone's struggle

to maintain balance and equilibrium in the complex and confusing world we live in.

These paintings contain recognizable images. What do they represent?

The symbols in my paintings can mean more than one thing. The leaf or sprout shape may be seen as a symbol of growth and represents my interest in nature. This shape also resembles an abstracted club or shillelagh. When juxtaposed with the head shape, perhaps it symbolizes a thought which can "bop" you.

The spiral that is repeated within the body of work represents concentric rings of energy. Also it is an ancient generative symbol. Relative to the head shape, the spiral relates to halos in religious paintings. Perhaps the Art History that I teach enters into the image.

The head shape itself has been present in my work since 1983. Only recently have I decided to include facial features in the finished work.

Do you think the viewer is more at ease with paintings that contain a figurative element?

The presence of a head or mask image makes the content more clear.

Do you feel you have to satisfy a

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Abstract art not for all to appreciate

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large audience?

If I were after a large audience, I would be using television as a medium. I accept the fact that my audience is probably a limited one. It is an audience that is interested in art. It is not my role as a painter to educate the viewer about what is art and what isn't. I am satisfied when those who are interested in art find something stimulating and exciting in my work. I think that the art community does respond well to my work. This is evident in that my work is shown in galleries, and occasionally it sells.

Although the arts have always appealed to a specific audience, it is true that representational art has a wider audience than does abstract art. Do you think abstraction has anything in common with realism?

Yes, all paintings contain the formal elements of art. These elements are shape, color, line, value, texture, attitudes of creating space, and compositional ideas. It is up to the artist to organize these elements on a flat surface. Both realistic and abstract paintings contain these elements. The difference is that abstraction does not contain a representational element. As Hans Hoffmann said, "Every figurative attempt in the visual arts is positively to be condemned when made without consideration of the underlying aesthetic principle of abstraction, because such mortal negligence will necessarily lead to uninspired, imitative and academic formalism."

I believe this is true, yet also I feel that realistic and abstract art styles are equally challenging.