

After Nature, But Never Imitative



By **LANCE ESPLUND** | January 13, 2005

PAT ADAMS IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ABSTRACT PAINTERS WORKING TODAY. YET YOU WILL NOT SEE HER paintings hanging at the Museum of Modern Art, and you will not see her work at the Whitney (even though they own one of her paintings). A 50-year retrospective of her work ought to be taking place at the Whitney or the Guggenheim this year, not at a gallery. But it is left to her longtime dealer, Virginia Zabriskie, to celebrate her monumental accomplishments.

The retrospective "Pat Adams: Paintings: 1954-2004," currently on view at Zabriskie Gallery, marks the 50th anniversary of the gallery, as well as its involvement with Ms. Adams, whose work Ms. Zabriskie has shown since the gallery's inauguration. Even though this show consists of fewer than 40 small paintings (there is no room for the larger works, some of which are 13 feet across) it shows a cohesive vision. It also shows just how important the relationship of dealer and artist really is: Zabriskie, since her gallery's inception, has been committed to her artists regardless of art-world fads or their wider success.

Here are a couple of remarks made by Ms. Adams:

"What really is this abstract painting? It is of things loved - that early Eden of a child's memory: a great, wide, flat expanse sprawling left to right, and very far out there in the rose/orange light of late afternoon, a very small triangular shape: Mt. Diablo."

"red/yellow/blue, black and white, up, down, and across, and the diagonal are what I have to work with."

The first remark, which evokes memory and sensation, "things loved" and things lost - that Proustian space within us that is devoted to fantasy, dream, and remembrance - suggests one side of being a painter. It is the side of feeling. The second remark describes the language, or tools, used by the painter to give those feelings form. Pat Adams clearly is aware of the importance of both. She is not a romantic. Nor is she a cold formalist. But she is interested in getting at the root - the genesis - of emotion, no less than she is interested in getting at the root, or properties, of genesis itself.

Ms. Adams's hard-nosed purity of approach is one that, as it shuns all illustrative, or outward, appearances and mimetic functions, never loses its grip on the mechanics and qualities of nature, which she treats as mystical and ordered. Her paintings fuse the inward realm of feeling with the external realm of cause and effect. It is as if she had done a vivisection on nature - laying bare life's elements and origins, its impetus, actions, and reactions at the most fundamental levels.

In the 1950s, when much of New York was doing large Pollock or de Kooning-esque, gestural abstractions (as Martica Sawin aptly points out in her catalog essay), Pat Adams was making small works like "Ribbon of Breath" (1954), a watercolor and gouache in rainbow-colored, swelling, and interlacing forms, closer to Klee and Kandinsky than to the heavy-handed bravado of the New York School.

And when, in the 1960s, Pop Art, Minimalism, and large color-field painting were the rage, Ms. Adams was making small, intimate, stippled works like "Steady Change" (1969), a painting in the scale of a manuscript that, with its undulating, linear border, its body and margin, has the frontal formality of a coat

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of arms. Yet it tessellates like light on a green sea, and it feels like the speckled surface of a gravestone. Seeing this work for the first time, I was reminded of something else Ms. Adams once said, to the effect that she thought the interlacing ribbons in Hiberno-Saxon works such as the "Lindisfarne Gospels" were probably influenced by the undulating coastline along the rocky cliffs where they were made.

One of the most startling things about Ms. Adams's works is that their flat surfaces, as active, various, and sometimes seemingly chaotic as they are, still maintain clockwork precision and clarity. It's as if we were seeing the stages of growth or the steps of transformation, each accompanied by its gaseous residue or shed skin. Ms. Adams mixes her pigments with bits of shell, beads, sand, and mica. Some of her paintings thicken and swell into roughened states, as if the paint had become petrified or diseased. Her surfaces can feel feathery or fiery, oily or bark-like. They can drift like smoke or glisten like gold. At times they appear to emit showers of sparks, seen at great distances, or to glow like dying embers, to blush or to heat with arousal, or to shudder, as if in ecstasy, within the plane.

Ms. Adams's paintings, from every period of her oeuvre, feel as if they are just beginning - infantile gatherings of cosmic dust, microscopic organisms, or the dreams of gods. Yet they also feel as if they were fully formed long ago, as if they were in the last stages of their denouement, only to be born again.

In "Late, New, Again, Round" (1985), we are offered a world equally nascent and primeval, macro and micro. Overlapping circular forms - molten, linear, translucent, and opaque; felt as stains, reptile skin, or perfectly ordered dots - hover, collide, drift, and intersect. The paintings refuse to fix or to state themselves; they remain forever in a state of coming into being.

Often, when standing before an Adams painting, the first impression is not of shape or line (as prevalent as these forms are) but of a living, pulsing texture, breathing in the space. The mostly red/green "Be/Hold" (2004), made primarily of a series of squares (like a checkerboard), is diffused by a floating, sparkling roughness in the plane, which is almost as primary as the painting's flatness. The texture, a scratchy, hot pink, rises from within the painting's skin like a pox or a fever, adding to its sanguine heat.

In "What Follows" (2003), a soft, dusty mist vibrates through the space. Coarse and warm, it feels both miasmatic and comforting. Almost impossibly, it shifts on occasion into liquid, giving buoyancy to the dot-filled oval and the circles in its field. The small, strange, and beastly work "Inwardly" (2000) is a paradox of qualities. A thickened, oval mass of what feels like weighty lava rock, the glistening, black shape literally swells forward from the plane, even as it opens inward like a star-filled, clear night sky. Yet it appears to hover in the space and to breathe deep. It lies pregnant and in wait, and it has the presence of a charred hell mouth, a sleeping plague, or a galaxy ready to form.

As much, though, as Ms. Adams's forms suggest the things or actions of this world, real or imagined, the analogous names given to them never stick. To label their forms is an attempt to get outside of the rectangle's pleasurable grasp on the senses. Ms. Adams's paintings immerse us in relationships. Her works are pure color, line, and texture. Circles and squares become "rhythm" or "red," and red gives way to presence - to heat, emotion, and light, rising and moving - things that live within us as they do within the paintings' skins.

Until March 5 (41 E. 57th Street, between Madison and Park Avenues, 212-752-1223). Prices: \$2,500-\$12,000.