

Don Lewallen

For Don Lewallen, arranging colors on a flat surface has never been preliminary to anything. His paintings declare their essentialness. Such is the primal appeal of his painting, that he gives us just colors and shapes. Increasingly, he fills the spaces between the shapes. There is an element of chaos in the work; it's understandable that he titled his exhibition "Origins of the Universe." Scientists have given us splendid interpretations of that long-ago occurrence, the excitement of which never fails to resonate.

Abstract Expressionists, whom Lewallen unhesitatingly acknowledges as a lasting influence, found themselves in a present-at-the-creation stance. They were helped by writers who wanted them to have a larger reason for what they were doing than merely laying down color on flat surfaces. The painter was instead at the center of an 'arena for action' and his spontaneous of-the-moment feelings and impulses became the subject matter. These actions that continually reaffirm one's self ideally mimic in microcosm the birth of the universe, especially if one believes along with the Eastern philosophies that the universe recreates itself every minute.

Fifty years on from Abstract Expressionism Lewallen takes some of the self out of the painting and gives color and form a semi-autonomy. More than self-expression, he is interested in the event of color and form and how they play out together. His linear imagery is getting increasingly assertive and gestural but it's not intended to contain deep-seated emotion. Lewallen likes its "fresh physicality." The linear elements help animate his circles and contribute to the sense of high excitement that he says is shared by art and the concept of the origins of the universe.

He's using a broader conceptual canvas than most Abstract Expressionists did by bringing cosmos into his scheme. Gottlieb and Newman did use this grand theme in different ways. But Lewallen doesn't rely on subject matter: the universe and the order and chaos in it are essentially a framework that heightens the very palpable sensation of paint being applied to canvas.

Lewallen's progression over the past few years shows an accelerated move from recognizable yet exotic landscapes in which the land forms were inspired by Chinese scholar's rocks. Each shape was livened internally with a pattern of marks. The move to the heavens was a major one. More varied kinds of matter coexisted in a single painting, but the space between the forms was still a void. The newest paintings reverse this; the circular forms started out as monochromatic and the gestural forms invaded the exterior space creating the almost literal fields. Recently the circles themselves have gotten painterly and more vital, and in some instances the small gestural marks have gotten bolder and have begun to overwhelm the once inviolable circles. This ratcheting up of the "action" is deliberate in an artist who aims to provoke both visceral and retinal excitement.

Two of Wallace Steven's rules for poetry were that it must be abstract and it must give pleasure. The giving of pleasure is one of Lewallen's aims; otherwise his pyrotechnics wouldn't take on such seductive coloring. He provokes a hedonistic excitement. It's not surprising that he admires Matisse, who attracted the epithet "luxe, calme et volupté." Don Lewallen readily subscribes to the luxury and voluptuousness.

The calm is something else.

- William Zimmer 2002