

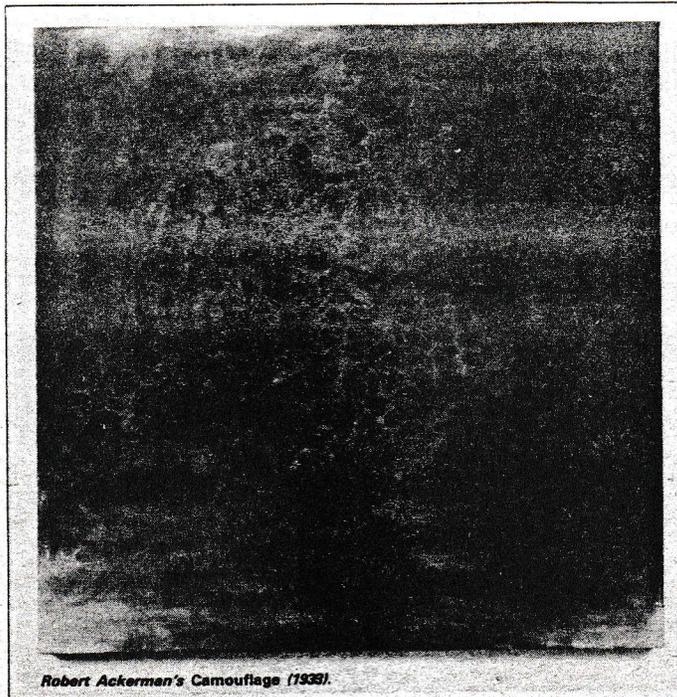
Art

The Pure Power Of Paint

Hunter Drohojowska

Here I was wondering about the meaning and purpose of art in general, and painting in particular, when I went to Robert Ackerman's exhibition at the Rosamund Felsen gallery. In the past, Ackerman was known for all-black canvases that were shaped to bow away from the wall. They always reminded me of a gimmicky Ad Reinhardt and, while handsome, they never really captured my interest. Hence, I was stunned to see the series of new paintings that will be on view through May 28. They are glowing, unabashedly beautiful works that coax forth the sensations of a nighttime walk in a silent forest or a long gaze into a deep, darkly green lake or an early evening rest in the crepuscular dimness of a mahogany-paneled library. The paintings arouse that familiar, uneasy, indistinct memory of staring into darkness and *sensing* rather than seeing another presence. Silence and time are embodied.

All these romantic and sensuous emotions are evoked by paintings that must be described as minimal fields of muted color. The surfaces are primarily somber greens, browns, blues, blacks, the colors glazed to create great depth. These are the surfaces of Rembrandt, for instance,



Robert Ackerman's Camouflage (1936).

Man in the Golden Helmet, but without the man.

You don't actually look at an Ackerman painting. You look *through* it. Although they are minimal panels of color, as lustrous and shining as a highly waxed table, they resonate with dimension. You strain to see further, beneath the paint, to glean more, to discover. These simple paintings are mysterious. Not confounding, but mysterious in the sense of withholding, of keeping a secret. The imagination is stimulated to association by their restraint. A viewer wants the secret unlocked, the expectation satisfied.

Undertow, a pair of deep blue, horizontal, and narrow vertical panels, surround a brushy, horizontal panel the color of sand. The whole comprises a rectangle. Even without the title, the painting has an ominous tone. You think of stormy waters, the drag of unseen forces that are powerful, even murderous. A restrained Turner, without the ships, comes to mind. The piece is all the more compelling for its abstract ambience.

In the show there are three paintings of inkish black, painted over camouflage material stretched like canvas. These seem dramatic in a more literal way. The camouflage, with its jungle patterns of green, tans, and browns, is obscured by the ebony field. You peer through the darkness to the field of dappled forms. It's eerie. This is the tension found in every war film, like *Apocalypse Now*, held at a standstill. The suspense of these paintings is located in a specific reference — camouflage material, associated with uniforms and battle. One small work,

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Camouflage (Jekyll) — because it is small — seems to hint at the presence of a figure, a soldier. Dr. Jekyll, of the title, was only a camouflaged version of Mr. Hyde, of course. Ackerman has not forgotten. *Hyde* is the title of a big, two-panel vista of a painting. It is the darkest, least gestured, and perhaps most dramatic piece in the show. It is the least giving, or revealing. Just a pair of panels, one vertical, one horizontal, together creating a long horizontal, an umbra of olive-toned dark bronze. Malevolence underlies the surface.

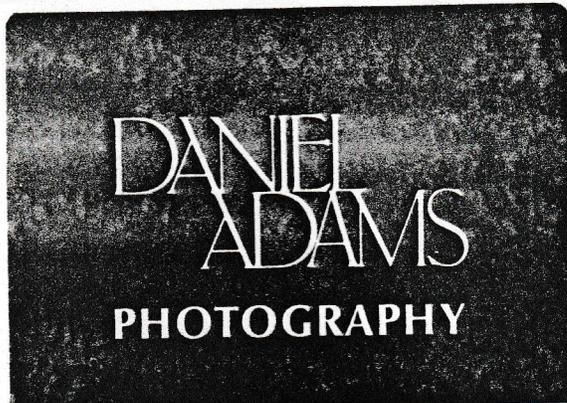
The surfaces of these paintings are rich, and mature. They are all oil on canvas — a medium I'd practically forgotten in the glut of acrylic, plasticene, vinyl, spray paint, rhexplex, and so on. For all their inherent beauty, however, these works are more than pretty pictures. The allusions of hoary art history linger in the shadows. Ackerman fuses the past with the present. Summoning forth the traditions of old masters, the application of paint in deep, glazed layers that seem to contain light, he works in the form of the minimal structure. With their essence of age, they look brand new.

Painting, in general, has been mining its past in a search for current styles for a few years now. Neo-expressionist and allegorical work are a couple of trends that come to mind. When the past is evoked, however, the tone is often one of irony. The common voice of the artists declaring, "We understand the past vocabulary of painting and it's all just a bunch of images to us. We don't take them seriously. And we can use whatever

we want. Remember Duchamp, remember conceptualism? So don't bother us with any of your arbitrary limitations."

In fact, such ironic distance is the immediate choral response in diverse areas of the arts today. However, Ackerman is not employing the past in irony. The apparent and intended meanings are congruent, not contrasted. Ackerman isn't borrowing a style from the past so much as demonstrating his knowledge of it.

Ackerman probably respects Rembrandt and Reinhardt, and isn't afraid to admit it in paint. The stance is a little scary because it seems so uncool. But Ackerman understands something important and eternal — the pure power of paint. This is an affection that seems almost old-fashioned. And just as I was doubting the muscles, the currency, and the purpose of painting, Ackerman reveals such doubts are folly. ■

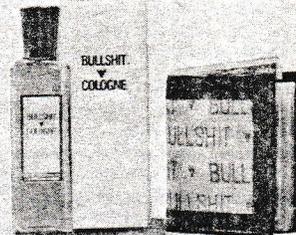


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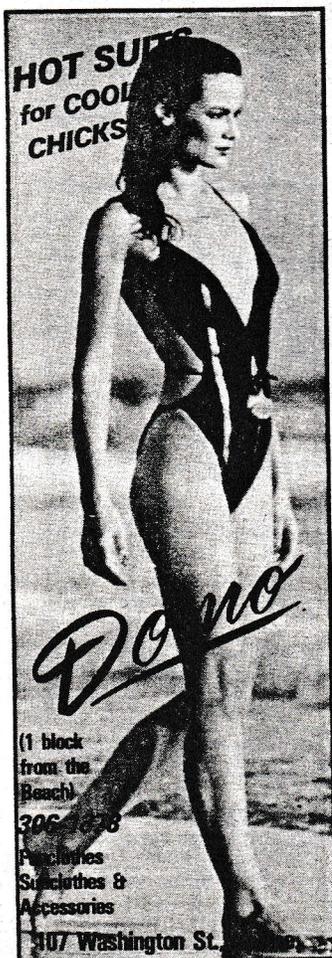
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