

PAUL SHANK: LANDSCAPE, STILL-LIFE, ABSTRACTION, AND THE FIGURE

Paul Shank. Paintings and Works on Paper: 1964-2008 at Phillip Slein Gallery presents a survey of artwork made over a productive 40-plus year career. Landscape, still-life, abstraction, and the figure drive the creative output of Saint Louis-based artist Paul Shank. Throughout his career, Shank has revisited each theme in singular investigations, but most often in compositional combinations. Shank puts forth a modesty in his expression that conveys a clear devotion to painting from which a highly personalized style emerges. Change and movement in his art are personal and reflect a creative freedom that defies categorization. Shank identifies connections between ways of working and ways of seeing in order to present various relationships between form and content. Place, history, beauty, objects, memory, and intelligence inspire Shank, and one becomes aware of the deep pleasure that this artist finds in creating visual relationships—through painting.

LANDSCAPE

In his landscapes, Shank focuses on extraordinary and often remote destinations based on personal travel. Shank has made travel essential to his life, and the impact and experience is ingrained in his memory. Some work is created immediately following a trip, while most is made following years of distance and reflection. The delightfully nagging image drives an impulse to revisit the past and re-imagine penetrating visions in two-dimension space. He focuses intently on presenting terrains of unimaginable beauty.

Remote and isolated sites fascinate the artist. Architecture and iconic sites along the Mediterranean represent some of Shank's first landscapes. In *Delos* (1973), a broken, yet pristine column hovers before a simple brown landscape. Selecting a singular object to represent the vast mythological, historical, and archeological site of Delos, Greece, Shank emphasizes the iconic nature of this isolated Greek island. The image maintains the verticality of its past despite its archaic collapse to signify a monumentality to the site and all it represents over time.

During the 1990s, Shank revisited an earlier trip he made to Algeria to create a new series of architectural-based landscapes. The distinctive Algerian white brick architecture we are accustomed to seeing in urban images of Algiers is powerfully rendered in remote desert locales in *El Oued* (1998) and *Domes* (1999). This region is known as the “City of a Thousand Domes” as most roofs are domed and light in color. Shank continues his fascination with Algeria with celebratory works *Arches* (2000), *Grand Eastern Erg* (2000), and *Desert Night No. 7* (2001). Many of the repeating motifs, directionals, and pastel palette inform a series of abstract gouache and figurative oil paintings years later.

Just as these paintings are inspired by geographical phenomena, so are two paintings depicting Scandinavian fjords—long narrow watery inlets with steep sides that are created in valleys carved by glaciers. In both *Hardangerfjord* and *Sognefjord*, watercolors from 1979, Shank uses the horizon line to determine the grandeur of the seen. Both landscapes are smaller in size, yet command majesty. His earliest landscapes are pictures from the West Coast made during Shank’s time living in San Francisco. Interested in perspective and spatial considerations, these works reflect nuances of location that are fragmented and abstract in presentation. Shank’s signifiers become more literal overtime, as his interest in the form of nature (specific flora and fauna) and cubism become increasingly evident in *San Francisco Bay with Iceplant* (1972) and *The Sonora Desert at Ajo* (1973).

STILL-LIFE

In the tradition of still-life painters, Shank selects mostly obscure objects he then renders worthy of painting. Tools, a clay pot, drafting materials, and shapes selected for their geometric precision comprise his still-life paintings. Shank’s abstract fragments are the subject matter from which he further obscures the functionality of the objects as they are choreographed for their inherent form and color over content. Interested in a sparse visual language, his paraphernalia and compositions are more modest than traditional still-life and are stripped of the metaphorical and symbolist language that functioned to impart morality.

Interested in the significance of light on the still object, Shank illuminates his arrangements by lighting them from above as a means to maximize shadow and create contrast with reduced hues. The shapes are painted with a minimal amount of information and a reliance on the knowability of surfaces. Striking a balance between exact description and fractured seeing, Shank explores materiality, texture, light, and order through materials imbued with distinct aesthetic qualities that require neither exaggeration nor enhancement.

While employing traditional strategies, the still-life represents Shank's most reductive work. Although his still-life work does not include fruit, flowers, goblets, or skulls; and nor do they reflect accumulation, wealth, morality, or death, they do address work and creativity. Using a dull, near monochromatic palette, the still-lives are non-objective and mechanical in nature. Recalling the machinist aesthetic of the Futurists and Precisionists, Shank's interest in notions of work, discipline, and production—as seen through a minimal lens—addresses creativity through an economy of means. This is skillfully apparent in *Mapson's Perfection*, *Still Life with Tools*, and *Still Life with Block*, all from 1995. Employing a Cubist-Realist approach, Shank reduces his composition to simple blocks, ovals, and cylinders, and sober color palettes to emphasize contrasting form that is both mechanical and organic. Shank writes about the impetus for his still-life investigations:

“[my] reinvestigation of the still life in itself, and, using the still life as a catalyst, an exploration of a formally structured space, grounded with recognizable objects but counterbalanced with an abstract restructuring of the space they inhabit, [creates] a disorientation of that space to the point that the viewer loses the ability to read any simple spatial logic at first glance, thus promoting a response to planar dynamics as well.”¹

ABSTRACTION

In Shank's abstract work, specific objects or actual events and occurrences are distant from any concrete reality. While one may recognize aspects of identifiable objects instead of locating any one subject, the abstract shapes, line, texture, and color arrangements evoke a more emotional response. In *Untitled No. 3* and *Untitled No. 4*, both from 2002, Shank alternates between warm and cool compositions. Interested in harmony and discord simultaneously, the artist conveys a necessity through the way in which such

qualities relate to each other in various intimate juxtapositions. Shank's non-representational images are purposeful and planned in their execution, yet yield a unique spontaneity not prevalent in other work.

Celebratory in nature, these works are tempered with a sense of immediacy and elicit open-ended emotional responses. Shank's fractured cubist approach that eliminates ornament and unnecessary information creates a compelling spatial depth and liberating freedom of form that dismantles any visual hierarchy. Color subtly clashes to animate the surface in syncopated moments, while undulating line and quick mark-making direct the eye. Shank's combination of a light hand and dissonant color palette recall the gestures and surface application of early 20th century modernists known for founding American Synchronism: Stanton Macdonald-Wright and Morgan Russell.

An earlier abstract cubist-inspired work, *Blue Poles*, 1984, that includes collage also references art history. As a tongue-in-cheek reference to Jackson Pollack's painting of the same title, Shank playfully explores the value of titles. As a large-scale, highly abstract still-life/landscape, Shank's *Blue Poles* portrays a disordered environment with a similar—and perhaps non-logical—addition of eight large vertical “poles” over the surface of the canvas. More interested in perspective, figure, and ground in this work, the artist nonetheless exposes a sense of humor regarding art, art criticism, art history, and the market.

Curiously inspired by the 15th century Italian artist, Paolo Uccello, Shank employs an ambiguous art historical reference in the gouache, *The Rout of San Romano* (2003). The title and imagery is based on Uccello's battle scene painting of the same title made in 1416. Shank includes a similar red St. George's Cross in a banner, likewise evoking pageantry and masculinity. Just as Uccello was notable for his interest in perspective, Shank plays with depth, perception, and the notion of a vanishing point within abstraction. A curious exploration is similarly explored in another work on paper, *Gegen Ende* of the same year.

THE FIGURE

In Shank's figurative, and most narrative work, he combines landscape, still-life, and abstraction to create fragmented stories about largely fragmented individuals. His figurative investigation involves the presentation of singular individuals (models and friends) and most recently of significant European writers. Each is prominently featured in either a landscape or interior that works to provide clues to the subject's history and identifying traits. The figures are mostly youthful and presented at their prime. Interestingly, earlier figurative work explores leisure and reflection, whereas the latest work is about intelligence and is more stoic in its presentation. Shank creates flat, massive figures anchored by their environment, based on research and authentic source materials such as photographs and postcards.

Key to Shank's figurative work is a corporeal translation of the relationship between figure, object, and its environment. Real and contrived parts are constructed based on significance and dependence on reality to become fundamental to the composition. Shank combines landscape and abstraction as figures are intertwined in their interior and exterior environments. Regarding this combination, Shank observes:

"The figure is separated from a flat, fragmented landscape by the contrast of real and abstract imagery and is further separated and anchored to its original context by interior objects. The intent is to tie together, not to isolate, these differing contexts: a figure quite real in reference to its original source; and a landscape, which while non-objective in a normal sense, does represent a literal translation of the reality not of life, but of process."²

Working within such parameters, Shank's most recent—and the artist's most socially and psychologically charged works to date—include vignettes about ideas, intelligence, volition, the marginalized, and the political. Art history intersects with portraits of historical, un-sung heroes with anguish-fraught lives. All are silhouetted in reflective poise, or in a moment of deep thought. Interestingly only one figure directly confronts the viewer with her authoritative gaze; that of mid-20th century, feminist writer, Ingeborg Bachmann.

In this recent work, narrative development of specific literary figures is carried out in accessible accounts. The subjects in three large-scale oil

paintings include: French Communist and novelist from the 1930s, Paul Nizan; Robert Musil, an important Austrian novelist and essayist writing in the early years of the 20th century through the 1930s; and Ingeborg Bachmann, an Austrian poet, novelist, feminist, and a leading voice in post-war German literature writing in the 1950s through the early 1970s.

The works *Paul Nizan in Aden* (2006), *Ingeborg Bachmann in Rome* (2007), and *Robert Musil at Mährisch-Weiskirchen* (2008) share a deliberate awkwardness, in which Shank incorporates a lyrical use of color along with shifting form, slippage of information, and deletes logical sequencing in preference towards iconic image building. In an effort to portray the idea of the figure, not just the image of the figure, subjectively, he simultaneously renders historical signifiers to depict subject matter. The realism and fiction of these works belongs to the artist and reflect his most imaginative expressions. His compositions are homage to these writers, but are not sentimental nor heroic. All are lesser known outside Europe, died young, or were isolated and misunderstood during their day. While the specificity and identity remains anonymous to most viewers upon first glance, Shank's large-scale paintings stress individuality, conviction, and the distinct contributions of his tragic figures.

Art history figures in another recent work, *Dismounting at Horta de Ebro* (2008). A youthful male, in profile, dismounts what appears to be a toy horse before a Spanish landscape. This painting is named for the small Spanish town in which Picasso spent time exploring new ideas that informed some of his most iconic cubist landscapes made during the summer of 1909. The reference is important to Shank as he continually explores faceted and fractured surfaces in his paintings— alongside significant art historical moments the artist admires.

Paul Shank. Paintings and Works on Paper: 1964-2008 presents a distinctively idiosyncratic studio practice. For Shank, the kernel of artistic discourse was established early in his career and while he is not loyal to any one genre, he respectfully employs all. He has worked hard to institute balance and interplay in his work. Concerned with the essential character of geographic location, object, and figure as a structural entity, Shank thoughtfully sets out to capture the inherent integrity and spirit of his subject matter. Through exercises in landscape, still-life, abstraction, and figure,

Shank pushes the boundaries of visual relationships. For this retrospective, Paul Shank has selected key paintings and works on paper that resonate in defining a practice that moves between genres and effectively illustrate the development, evolution, and continuity of a distinctive creative articulation and passion for painting.

—Shannon Fitzgerald, independent curator and writer

1 From an artist statement prepared for a solo exhibition *Paul Shank: Works on Paper*, Stein Gallery, St. Louis, February 1994.

2 From an artist statement prepared for a solo exhibition *Paintings* at Dana Reich Gallery, San Francisco, February 1982. Shank discusses a series of paintings of figures in the landscape.