

Art in America

MAY 1983/\$3.50
Outside North America/\$5.00

Cover: Susan Rothenberg's *Untitled*, 1980-81
Joel Shapiro/Bob Thompson/Ellen Lanyon/Robert Moskowitz
Linda Nochlin on Orientalism/Susan Rothenberg/Charles James's Fashion
Boston: A Special Report/Books/Review of Exhibitions



art practice arises from a need to put "feeling" back into painting, Gray quietly tells us it has never left.
—John Yau

Doug Ohlson at Susan Caldwell

This was Doug Ohlson's 14th one-man show in New York since 1964. In 1968 he won a Guggenheim Fellowship. His career as a painter has focused on color to the exclusion of nearly everything else—but it is an inexhaustible subject.

The principal paintings in this latest show are environmental in their side-to-side sweep. Their surfaces are subdivided into vertical compartments of color, some hard at the edges, some smoldering, some soft. Other works contain L-shaped elements, or "predellas" of color areas at foot and top which contrast with the colors of the principal rectangles: Ohlson uses all kinds of different colors, in all kinds of different combinations.

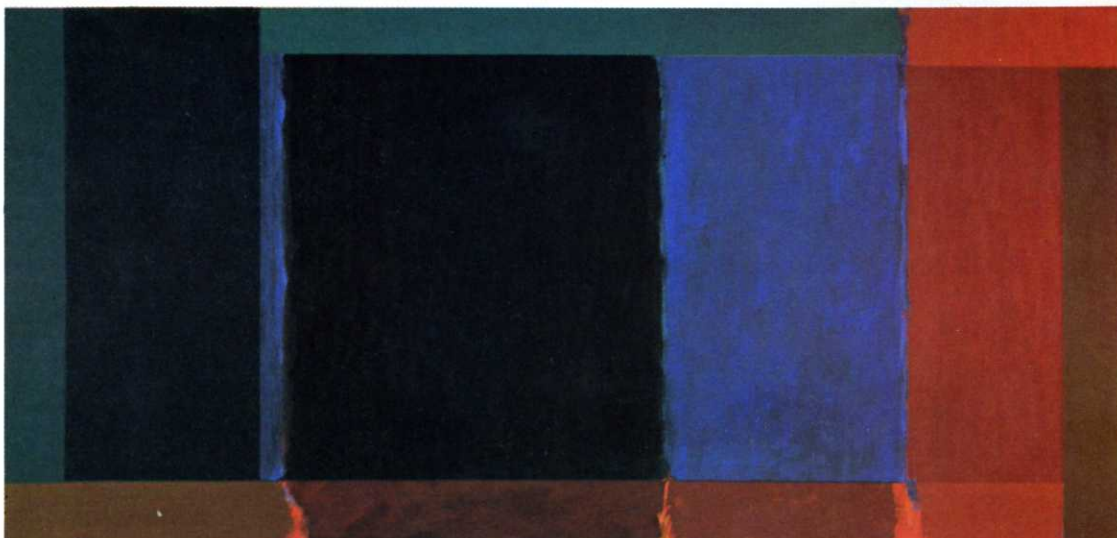
One work that appealed to me particularly is called *Thought Pocket*; here most of the color panels—black, blues, greens—are very close in value, so that there is a tremendous contrast between the dark panels, as a group, and a much lighter blue panel, edged—as startling as an unfamiliar taste—by a flicker of orange.

In *Cadman's Blue*, a densely red brown calls to a green across a gulf of black and blue, while there burns, elsewhere in the same work, a red as though set afire by a burning glass. These paintings have no image-ground relationships. They are either all-image or all-ground. The color-units seem analogous to verses of concrete poetry. If one were to write their names, the colors could be distinguished by variations in type size and style.

A German scientist, David Katz, wrote a book called *The World of Color*, published in English in 1935; it still contains ideas in advance of any other book I have read on color. Katz distinguishes among three modes of colors, which he calls surface, volume and film. Ohlson is a not a scientist, yet he seems to me to be taking an almost scientific interest in the possibilities of color, and making modal distinctions analogous to Katz's. His color is variously physical, spatial, transparent, etc.—qualities which he explores less by calculation than by intuition. There are intriguingly subtle variations in Ohlson's long paintings, which at first appear to be as blank as a file of soldiers on parade. As the eye passes along the



Douglas Martin: *Continental Drift*, 1982, acrylic on canvas, 96 by 180 inches; at Edward Thorp.



Doug Ohlson: *Cadman's Blue*, 1982, acrylic on canvas, 7 by 14 feet 8 inches; at Susan Caldwell.

OIL & ACRYLIC + UPSIDE DOWN

ranks, there are signs of an unobtrusive clandestine activity, as though a whispered message was being transmitted from one end to the other. —Lawrence Campbell

Douglas Martin at Edward Thorp

During the last few years a number of artists have returned to the formal concerns of postwar American art. Some, of course, can justly claim never to have deserted these concerns, while others are converts or beginners. All these artists share the premise that they are building on what was accomplished by earlier generations—by the "Golden Age," so to speak. These artists also assert that abstract painting is as

American as apple pie.

Martin's earlier paintings were characterized by emblematic imagery; it was allusive without being referential, suggestive rather than descriptive, and dealt with issues of flatness and frontality. Now, in this recent show, Martin's paintings continue to be allusive while no longer addressing the givens of formalism the way they once did. Instead of insisting on flatness and frontality, Martin depicts space as well as models his shapes to some degree. This might seem like a step backward, but to my mind the change is significant. Martin, who is in his mid-30s, has clearly decided that something personal and suggestive can be accomplished in the abstract mode. Following through on his intuitive beginnings, he has become introspective and questioning, no

longer content to produce formalistic variants on the recent past.

Of the four paintings in this show, the most successful is also the largest, an 8-by-15-foot diptych titled *Continental Drift*. Unlike his earlier emblematic abstractions, a work like this suggests an imaginary landscape. In it, the reds, oranges, blacks and grays can be read as a turbulent field of magma. Martin achieves an effect of deep space by starting his shapes at the edges of his paintings and then angling them toward the center to produce a generalized effect of perspective. In *Continental Drift*, the viewer stands as if on some precarious ledge, peering down into an abyss of colors and shapes.

It's too early to tell where Martin's departure will lead, but the new work raises issues that the