

Doug Ohlson: Heroic Abstraction

by Carter Ratcliff

Over eleven feet wide and nearly six feet tall, Doug Ohlson's *Parade Rest*, 1996, is a big painting. And it is bold, asserting itself with a self-assured pattern of vertical stripes and rectangles. *Rousillon*, 1997, is almost twice as wide as *Parade Rest* and it deploys its shapes even more bluntly. With their stark forms and grand dimensions, canvases like these have won Ohlson a central place in the heroic tradition of American abstraction. Yet his characteristic colors—pink, lavender, the bright green of early spring foliage—may well give us pause. For this is not the palette we associate with his predecessors, who include Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Barnett Newman. Late in his career, Rothko specialized in dark, brooding purples. Still's palette often tended toward tarry black. Newman sometimes used bright reds and oranges but never pastel hues. There is something a touch outrageous about Ohlson's prettier colors. Don't they belong in a completely different sort of painting—Impressionist landscape, perhaps, or the more decorative varieties of still life?

Because Ohlson appeared in the New York art world during the early 1960s, it is tempting to say that he crosses the deep seriousness of the Rothko generation with that era's flashy exuberance. It was a time of hot pinks and sensuous magentas, not only in Pop Art but also in Op, Minimalism, and the hard-edged abstraction of such painters as Frank Stella and Nicholas Krushenick. Ohlson quickly made a mark by finding his own uses for the livelier options of the '60s. Yet he had a larger ambition and as the years went by the nature of that ambition became increasingly clear.

His orderly sequences of vertical stripes and wide rectangles remind us that a canvas is, after all, a flat surface with straight edges and four corners. With this reminder he asserts the physical presence of his paintings and finds an affinity with Donald Judd and other Minimalists who insisted that a work of art is, first and last, a palpable thing. The literal facts of shape and color must be self-evident and uncomplicated by any sign of the artist's touch—a rule Ohlson never followed, as we see with a close look at his rectangular forms, with their feathered, sinuous edges.

Sensing the confident sweep of the artist's brush, we see the interplay of background and edge opening onto imaginary space. For his shapes are not merely applied to the canvas. Luminous themselves, they hover in a realm of potentially unbounded light. Ohlson belongs in the company of Rothko, Newman, and Still because, like them, he intimates the infinite. The boundlessness we feel in his paintings originates, partly, in the depth of his colors. Nothing here brings vision to a halt. Just as important, nothing in the arrangement of his forms suggests closure. Of course, his rectangles and stripes must stop at the canvas's edges. This is a physical necessity. For the imagination, however, his arrays of form could go on forever.

Meaning, too, is unconstrained and there is no need to see Ohlson's squared-away shapes simply as variations on the outlines of the canvases where they appear. Charged with his painterly energy, these forms are susceptible to a figurative reading as well. We could, in other words, see them as emblems of a human presence—and then ask who they represent. The artist? Or are they more general, an invocation of our shared humanity? These interpretations are not at odds. Both make sense and yet the distinctive brilliance of Ohlson's brushwork, of his sense of pictorial structure, inclines me to see his forms primary a reiterations of his own commanding and ever-evolving individuality.

The grandeur of these paintings carries them beyond ordinary experience to the Sublime, as Newman and his colleagues called it. Of course, the Sublime is a concept not easily defined. One feels it as a kind of exhalation, a promise of infinite possibility, and it encourages us to see ourselves as equal to that promise. With his characteristic pinks and lavenders, Ohlson generates the light that fills his version of the Sublime, and thus he makes it impossible to see these colors as merely pretty. They are strong, even fierce, and unique in the tradition to which Ohlson belongs. Mark Rothko spoke of the Sublime as darkened by tragedy. For Barnett Newman it was the habitat of "the self, terrible and constant." The self is constant for Ohlson, too. Few painters are as immediately present in their work as he is. But the self we encounter in his work is neither terrifying nor terrified. In his art, Ohlson achieved serenity. And by raising this often modest quality to a heroic scale he found a place in the front ranks of abstract painters.