

# Abstraction in Chicago

by CRAIG ADCOCK

*Through their affinities of form, the primitive (naive) object and the modernist abstraction can both lay claim to quality and are thereby valued. They represent the best aspects of culture, and despite any leveling of distinction between high and low that may have occurred, they are both nonetheless appropriated (made into property) through processes of critical validation.*



Julia Fish, *Cumulous*, 1990, oil on canvas, 30x27 in. Robbin Lockett Gallery, Chicago. Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

When characterizing art in Chicago, one normally thinks first of Imagism — the works produced by such groups as the Hairy Who, the False Image, and the Non-Plussed Some. Their funk-oriented pictures were fundamentally related to (and often directly inspired by) outsider art. In such terms, Imagism reflected art

forms determined by socio-economic processes of marginalization. The imagist style came as much from the seamy side of life — tattoos and bandages, body decorations and bondage — as it did from the cultured world of high art. Chicago Imagism related to indigenous art forms, and the sources it found in art history — prin-

cipally Surrealism — were themselves marginalized and deemed too suspect (or too low) to qualify as good art by the standards of high Modernism. Imagism brought to mind not only Dali, de Chirico, Duchamp, and Ernst, but also wrestling, whorehouses, drug use, petty crime, old comic books, and jazz —



John Dunn, *Sence* (diptych), 1990, oil on canvas, 69x119<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. Roy Boyd Gallery, Chicago.

the common denominators of society taken down to levels even lower than anything dared by New York Pop artists. But Imagism didn't just go down for its sources; it also expanded outward to include peripheral (far out) domains of social practice.

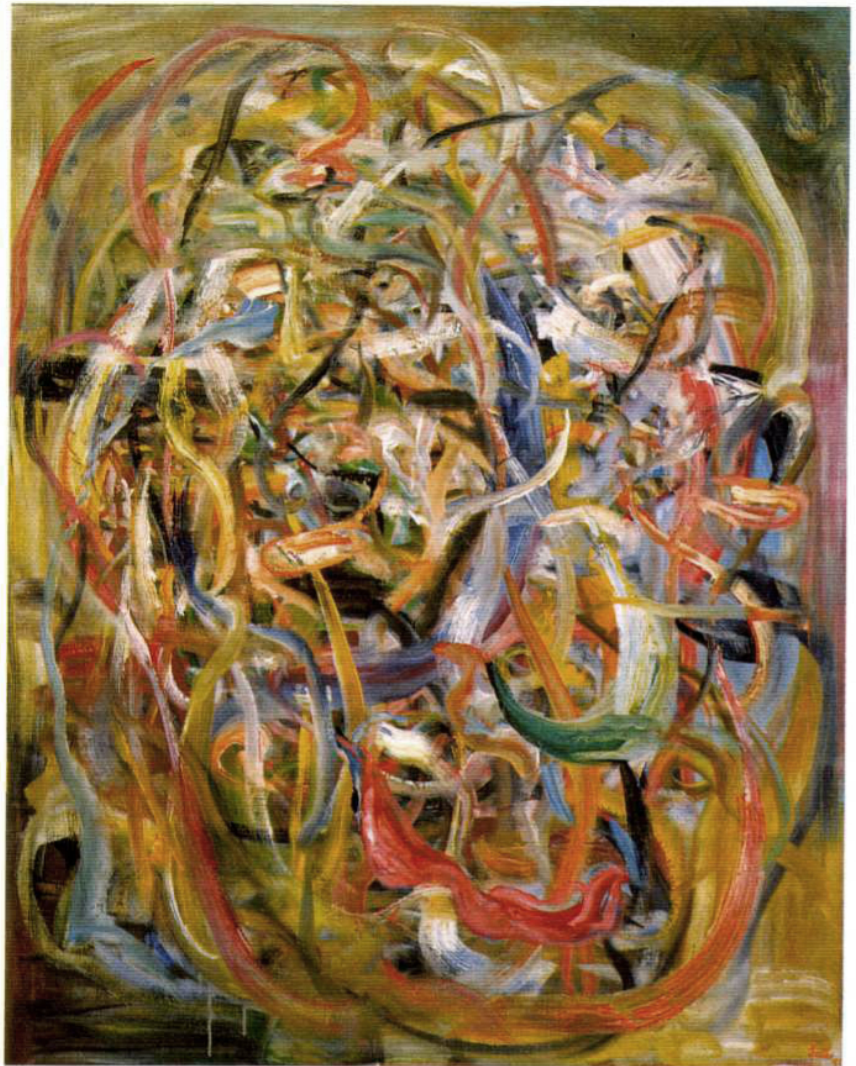
The funky approach of Chicago Imagism has been influential, and the cultural pluralism that characterized the decade of the 1980s can be traced in part to the multiplicity of styles and the open-ended attitudes of imagist artists. Chicago Imagism questioned the autonomy of Modernism. In place of life in forms, Chicago Funk suggested life in the world; it dealt with excess, pain, insanity, fun and games, exhaustion, contradiction, difficulty; and it indexed the provisional nature of existence. Abstract art (and non-representational art) in Chicago, even though not the primary basis for the city's reputation, has been practiced over the years by any number of artists — one thinks of such painters as Dan Ramirez and Vera Klement as early forerunners. Their work — and much of the abstraction that followed — shared a certain quirkiness with Imagism.

There has been considerable cross-fertilization between the imagist and the abstractionist strains of artistic production in Chicago. Indeed, much imagist art demonstrated the inherent ambiguities of the term "abstraction." In one sense, an "abstraction" is a partial quality or aspect taken from an object and then considered in isolation. Many imagist paintings are hybridizations of form and con-

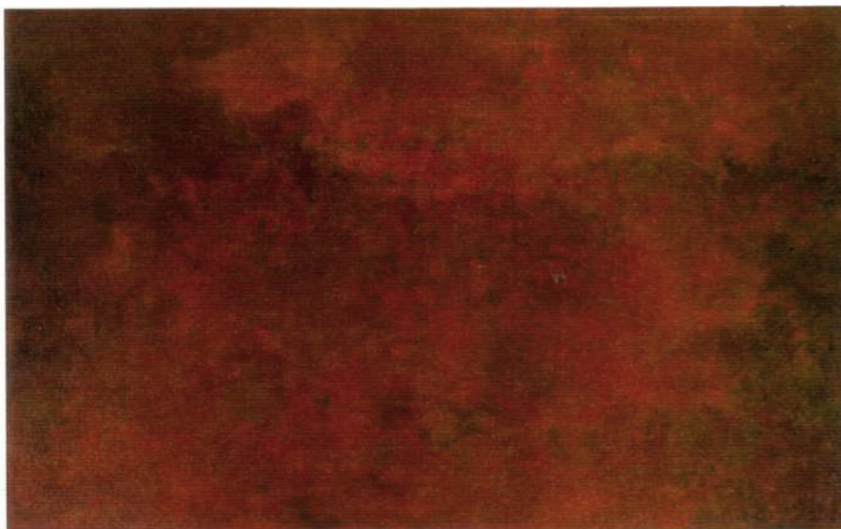
tent. This "abstracted" approach of the Imagists has been followed and elaborated upon by many younger Chicago painters. In the recent works of Jim Lutes, for example, a

residual funkiness continues to operate. His canvases echo the strange excrescences and *horror vacui* of earlier Imagism. His Guston-like expanses of thick, painfully applied paint emerge here and there as "abstractions from reality" when a swirling brushstroke momentarily becomes a nostril or an ear lobe. John Dunn's paintings, also partaking of residual funkiness, are more "abstractions from the imagination" than "abstractions from reality." They seem to illustrate Dennis Adrian's observation that Chicago abstraction deals as much with "an intricate emotional and spiritual kind of content" as it does with pure form.

An interest in "spirituality," however, is by no means the principal unifying attribute of Chicago abstraction. Indeed, Chicago abstraction is more likely to be irreverent and skeptical than otherworldly and ro-



Jim Lutes, *Laughing Bastard*, 1990, oil on linen, 61x49 in. Dart Gallery, Chicago.



Judy Ledgerwood, *Indigenous*, 1989, oil, encaustic, canvas, 90x144 in. Robbin Lockett Gallery, Chicago.

mantic, and it is often deadpan and ironic in its relationship with “images” irrespective of whether those images are observed or made-up. In the recent paintings of Julia Fish and Judy Ledgerwood, for example, abstract images are derived from nature, but in the final analysis this fact is virtually beside the point. Or perhaps more accurately, the near indistinguishability of abstraction and representation when the latter is pushed to an extreme becomes the central point of the work. As Fish has said about her approach, “the experience of each [abstraction and representation] serves to inform the other. It is the negotiation between the two languages that holds my greatest attention.” Ledgerwood’s paintings also operate at a cusp between abstraction and representation. They are “of” skies or fogbanks much as Rothko’s paintings were “of” fields of color. By occupying a subtle “in-betweenness,” her abstractions “from nature” foreclose any kind of transcendental reading. As Kathryn Hixson has observed, “Ledgerwood frustrates the utopian urge for unification with a healing nature or a psychic sublime by illustrating that this urge is predicated on complicit participation in segregation, possession, and exploitation.”

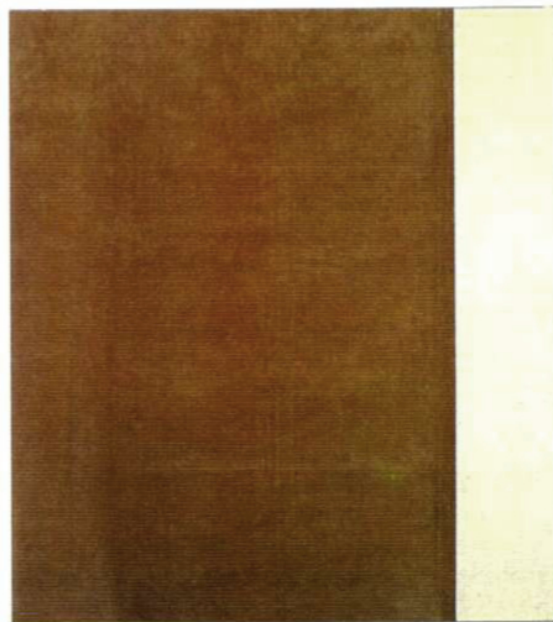
Chicago abstraction parallels Imagism in its challenges to the metaphysical assumptions of high Modernism. Like Imagism, abstract (or abstracted) art in Chicago sheds

light on the obscurity of the center. It reveals the ideological sources of artistic production, not so much in terms of what it contains, but in terms of what it leaves out. It is, in this sense, constructed from the margins. The fascination that the Imagists had for the works of “naive,” marginalized peoples, was symptomatic of their own desire to be decentered. The new abstraction also looks for some primary derivation, but it does so with an enhanced awareness of the mythical status of original sources. It is cognizant that simplification in and of itself is untenable (or too simple) and that reduction alone leads not to purity, but to delimitation and encirclement within flat space — a *décernement* contaminated by fictions of significant form.

Abstraction and representation are analyzed at complex levels by Mitchell Kane and Gaylen Gerber. Kane’s *Margin Paintings*, constructed using aluminated rubberized canvas, carry such associations as “margin of error” or “margin of tolerance.” Particularly when the 7x5½-foot paintings are displayed together, they suggest some Rothkoesque chapel in which unified spirituality has been displaced by a demonstra-

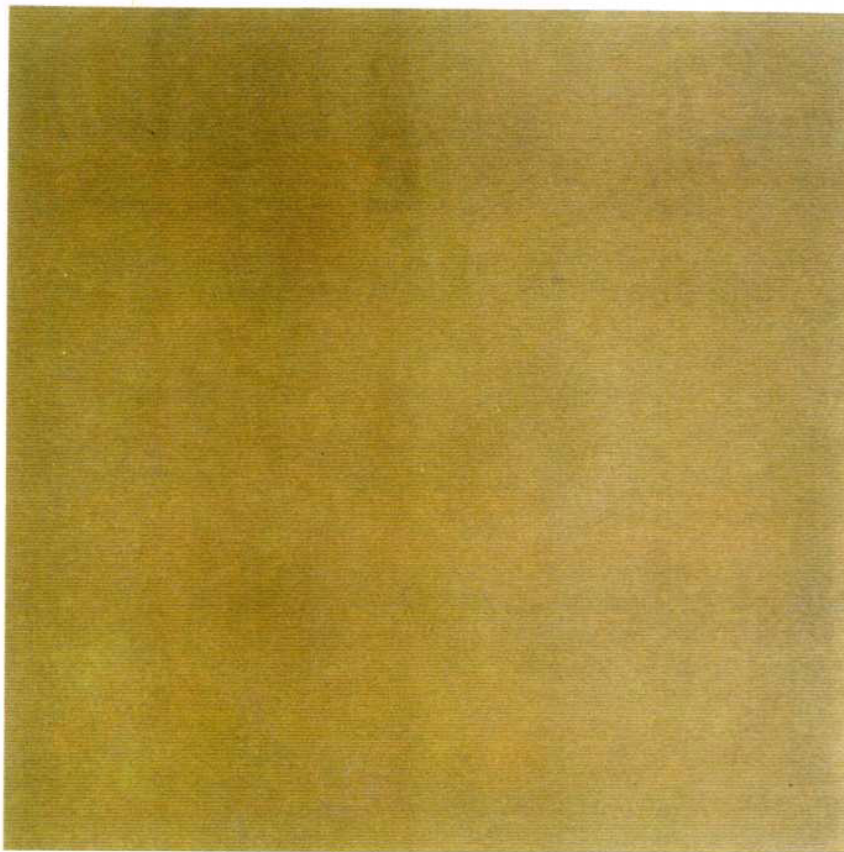
tion of cultural contradiction and ambiguity. His *Margin Paintings* hypostatize the process of marginalization. As abstracted margins of books, they suggest something of the ambiguity of language and its use as a means of abstracting people. They point to the mediated abstractness of words, cultural constructs containing a middle ground blankness filled in by all that occurs between raw sense data and ideology. Gerber’s representational paintings (of randomly chosen still-life objects) are so lightly configured that they at first seem invisible. Only by looking very hard, virtually by willing the images to exist, can they be seen at all. The same image is repeated from canvas to canvas and the same canvases are repeated from exhibition to exhibition. From show to show, the images become increasingly vague, reaching a point where the individual paintings contain little more than a memory trace. In these terms, Gerber’s work refuses to occupy either an abstract or a representational realm. As he says, “it puts familiarity in jeopardy, if only between canvases.”

Abstract art is a recent invention tied to the development of modernity



Mitchell Kane, *Margin Painting (wht)*, 1988, enamel and gesso on aluminated rubberized canvas, 84x69 in. Robbin Lockett Gallery, Chicago.

in general and the rise of Modernism in particular. In the eighteenth century, “art” still meant “skill.” By the early nineteenth century, this older



Gaylen Gerber, *Untitled*, 1990, oil on canvas, 38x38 in. Robbin Lockett Gallery, Chicago.

sense of the term changed, and the word came to be used as a designation for the unique productions of genius — it came to mean “high art” as we know it. One explanation for the change entails the industrial revolution: as production (and reproduction) technologies supported a growing bourgeois class, art works, along with their appreciation and collection, became marks of distinction. Art protected the ruling classes from the onslaughts of mass culture. As Pierre Bourdieu has expressed it, “the denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile — in a word, natural — enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences.”

Throughout the twentieth century, one of the hallmarks of avant-garde practice has been a tendency to blur the distinctions between “high” and

“low” art forms — to level the differences between, for example, Western (Eurocentric) art and non-Western (primitive) art. In the process, Primitive Art has grown to include various kinds of outsider production and now incorporates naive artists such as Joseph Yoakum, the untrained black painter from the south side of Chicago so much appreciated by members of the Hairy Who. Despite the expansive nature of such moves, a number of significant threads continue to connect the avant-garde aspects of modernity with the formalist tenets of Modernism, creating filiations between appropriation and the exclusionary aspects of the term art in its modern sense. Even though in the twentieth century we have learned to appreciate “ethnographic objects” as “works of art” and the productions of outsider artists as expressions of alternative ways of looking at the world, we still demand of these masterpieces of “otherness” that they be, like real works of high art, authentic.

The authenticity of the outsider object — be it an African tribal mask or a painting by a naive artist — entails

aspects of ownership and appreciation that supersede the specifics of the given work’s production. Like modernist abstract art, such work from the margins is capable of being evaluated, so it is claimed, in terms of universal formal qualities. Through their affinities of form, the primitive (naive) object and the modernist abstraction can both lay claim to quality and are thereby valued. They represent the best aspects of culture, and despite any leveling of distinction between high and low that may have occurred, they are both nonetheless appropriated (made into property) through processes of critical validation.

Among the most important insights that have emerged in contemporary critical debates is a recognition of the contingency involved in either producing or choosing a work of art. By choosing outsider art, the Chicago Imagists of the 1960s made that outsider art their own; they appropriated it to themselves. The Latin root for “appropriate” (*proprius*), as James Clifford has pointed out, implies both “proper” and “property.” One way of dealing with this kind of dilemma is to produce works that contain their own denial. It is to produce abstractions that are no longer the alienated surfaces of Modernism. As Terry Eagleton has remarked: “Those flattened surfaces and hollowed interiors are not ‘alienated’ because there is no longer any subject to be alienated and nothing to be alienated from, ‘authenticity’ having been less rejected than merely forgotten.”

Contemporary abstraction in Chicago is grounded in traditions that favor de-centered points of view. The best such work produced in the Windy City operates in a domain where transcendence is absent, art is indeterminate, and the subject is dead. It deals with the contingent nature of any abstraction, any formal representation, as it works within an awareness (suspicion) of the political machinations that order capitalist technocracy. The work ponders the dilemmas involved in the current state of affairs in which the classical subject can no longer exist, just as the work of art can no longer disclose “reality” — in either autonomous or representational terms. □