JOHN FREEMAN SYMBOLS Loud and Silent

By John Ewing

A charm of time separates us from the Anasazi rock art of the ancient Southwest. Scholars try to decipher these Native American petroglyphs with catalogs and carbon-dates, but as history rewrites itself, it may be artists who most thoroughly explore these early art forms and the nature of symbolism itself.

Utilizing ritual symbols as emblems of the unconscious mind, the Abstract Expressionists were turned on to Native American and other early spiritual imagery. In the midst of social and intellectual upheaval, painters like Robert Delaunay, Wassily Kandinsky and Jackson Pollock drank liberally from the well of spiritual archetypes. They looked back in order to break new ground, incorporating the creating myth of Kokopelli, far-eastern mandalas and everything in between into their iconoclastic works.

John Freeman's recent exhibition of large painting and furniture at the Primary Object Gallery relies on our familiarity with these symbol systems.

As with language or mathematics, the root power of any symbol system is the reliable consonance of messenger and message. The number "3" must always represent three. If it ever means four or five, the symbol system is imperiled. With spiritual imagery there are "variations on a theme" but symbols only communicate to the extent they are predictable.

Top: "Texas Hill Country" (detail). Bottom: "Homage to Pollock's Blue Poles," by John Freeman.

Anasazi rock art spans several thousand years but much of its vocabulary remains constant: the flute-playing Kokopelli and other kachina figures, sun signs, the stair-step "cloud terrace." Within the tradition, these elements gain communicative power as they relate, time and again, to scenes of daily life. Through repeated symbolism, the relationships between earthly activities and spiritual concepts were reinforced.

John Freeman's painting and furniture designs borrow heavily from the Anasazi vocabulary, but they privilege the abstract motives. The large canvases contain a solitary gesture, a zigzag line that mimics Native American "cloud-terraces", circles and spirals. Freeman avoids any figurative elements like the anthropomorphous and zoomorphs central to a Native American "narrative" (or, for that matter, any narrative).

Apparently, without these elements there is very little for the zigzagging lines to do. The only relationship is between these foreground line gestures and the contrasting field. In some of the paintings, the mottled field is light and the gestures are dark; in others, it's the reverse. Without the states of earth and heaven to transcend, without copulation/birthing/hunting scenes to enact, these graphic vectors twist about but do not seem to move with any purpose. Organized in fairly symmetrical arrangements, they lie motionless and mute.

That need not be. In Jackson Pollock's Guardians of the Secret, this same relationship is a powerful visual "totem" for the unconscious mind. Series upon series of discrete geometric patterns abut and encase each other. These gestures, inspired by the very same Native American motives, lie deeply embedded in densely hued fields of complex color. The overall effect resonates compellingly with the work's title.

In Freeman's case, more is less. The canvases are jam-packed with these empty gestures, exaggerating their superfluity. The color palettes of the mottled backgrounds alternate between an insipid wanness and an equally generic, primary-hued garishness.

Left and Right: Details of John Freeman's painting - "Texas Hill Country."

In the most successful of the exhibition's works (a tall rectangular panel entitled Pine Forest in the High Desert – for Sylvia, one finds the most expressive element in the entire show. Amidst all the busyness, there is a small, amorphous star shape painted in dark blues, greens and traces of bight orange. This graceful, poignant moment is lost in the rest of the exhibition's unedited, slapdash gibberish. Abstract paintings may address the wanderings of the unconscious mind, but painters should be wholly present when executing them.

John Freeman claims in his "artist statement" (did the Anasazi have such a thing?) that he has "always been fascinated and interested in art that takes on a history and existence of its own beyond the artist." Is this why the Primary Object Gallery feels like a home for abandoned children, a roomful of orphan paintings miserable to the point of abjection?

The notion of a work of art having autonomy is an amusing mind game, but ultimately a cop-out. Art does not have an "existence of its own" irrespective of and disconnected from its creator. That governing quality of ownership (auteurism) is carried along with the work. It is embedded in the work even as the artist moves to other projects. Essayist Stanley Crouch put it well to Charlie Rose when he declared in a recent interview, "You show your love for your audience by giving your best work, every time." Art is the trace of the artist, his progeny, the embodiment of what he desires and believes. Why else would the Southwest ancients have bothered?

Sources:

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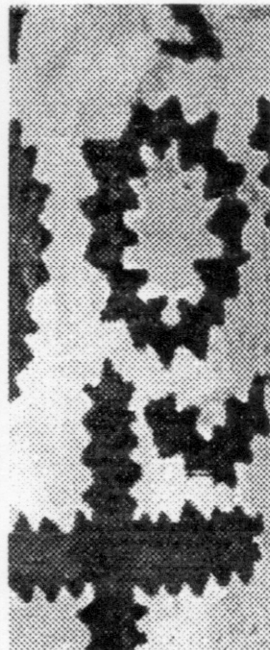

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Left and Right: Details of John Freeman's painting - "Texas Hill Country."