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July 2012

## Cleve Gray: "The Connecticut Paintings" at Diane Rosenstein Fine Art

by Peter Frank



*Vernal* 1963

**Cleve Gray**

Oil on canvas

81" x 55"

Photo: courtesy Diane Rosenstein Fine  
Art

The revival of interest in postwar abstract painting is demonstrably a phenomenon not just of the art market, but of the current discourse among artists. The growing interest in painting's embodiment of refined aesthetic experience, as well as in the social and intellectual history of painting in the 20th century, has re-valored the paintings the "greatest generation(s)" left behind, allowing them to float free of the disputes and manipulations that had led to both their prominence and their fall from grace. The work of Cleve Gray, for instance, was widely admired in his day, and its admirable qualities sustain: deep, resonant color, simple and

readable gesture, a stark figure-ground contrast that thrusts those gestures forward as if they were traditional Sino-Japanese calligraphy jumping off rice paper. Now, however, Gray's canvases come to us as revelations rather than as reifications of a fashionable mainstream. In fact, for all their elegance --indeed, because of it--they stand a little apart from the mainstream of their day. They hewed effortlessly to Clement Greenberg's post-Abstract Expressionist dicta, but were impelled more by the proto-Minimalist examples of Newman and Rothko, Motherwell and, yes, Frankenthaler. Gray was a painter's painter, not a critic's painter, and painted in response to other painting. As a painter--and a painter's painter--Gray knew when to stop, and made a virtue of stopping soon. The works not reductive, but simply reduced, to lyric relationships whose luminosity and/or vigor sustain themselves. Dependent on staining techniques, the paintings provide no surface interest to speak of, but their scale allows the eye to fall into their shapes and energies (even in the works on paper--scale being not a matter of pure size, but of the painting's ability to fill the visual field)

This survey of Gray's painting, spanning four decades from 1963, at Diane Rosenstein in Beverly Hills, sampled many of the periods the artist passed through while working up in Connecticut. Rather than segregate earlier, more deliberately

composed canvases from later, more fluid ones, the installation integrated works from various years, emphasizing enduring characteristics rather than tracing Gray's evolution. Comprising 17 oils and eight watercolors, the selection could not adequately have described that evolution, so the emphasis on stylistic consistency made perfect sense, especially as it cohered visually so well. Gray may have shared in what Irving Sandler called "The Triumph of American Painting," but his achievement was less triumphal than simply assured--an accomplishment less innovative than summative.