

**David Row's Futuristic Abstractions Scramble for Techno-Zeitgeist**

By Mario Naves 10/11/04 12:00am

“Stupid as a painter”—it’s a French phrase connoting, not a painter’s literal stupidity, but the reason he picks up a brush: because words fail him. I always took it to be a sardonic compliment, a wry acknowledgment of a painter’s intrinsic need to communicate through purely visual means.

Now I’m not so sure. After a cursory Google search, I discovered that the phrase was a favorite of Marcel Duchamp. For a figure who considered painting (and art) a dead end, “stupid as a painter” takes on a different and altogether cynical connotation. Then again, I always felt that Duchamp’s abandonment of painting was due less to nihilistic principle than the self-realization that he wasn’t any good at it. Proving, I suppose, that Duchamp was smart enough to recognize he wasn’t “stupid.”

“Stupid as a painter” came to mind while looking at the recent paintings of David Row, currently at Von Lintel Gallery. Mr. Row is, in many respects, a painter’s painter, an artist particularly (not to say narrowly) attuned to the properties of his craft. Juxtaposing snarled brushstrokes, diagrammatic forms and small exclamatory circles against squeegeed runs of vivid color, Mr. Row creates abstract art for the age of virtual reality. Notwithstanding the expert manipulation of oils—there’s no doubting Mr. Row’s knowledge of the medium’s physical capabilities—the paintings threaten to disappear before our eyes. They seem bodiless. Their light is artificial and sharp, the gestural marks secondhand, the space deep and airless. The overall tenor is distant and thin. The pictures are inconceivable without the advent of the computer.

That they are self-conscious and overintellectualized almost goes without saying. Mr. Row may be “stupid as a painter,” yet that doesn’t prevent him from scrambling to keep up with the technological Zeitgeist. He poaches upon its authority, aiming to endow the paintings with a contemporary zing. Like most new forms of technology, Mr. Row’s abstractions are equipped with built-in obsolescence. There’s no way the canvases aren’t going to look dated in 20 years. Artists are better building upon the past than partaking of the future.

This isn’t to say that Mr. Row’s paintings don’t work. There, too, they share a similarity with the latest in gadgetry and gizmos: Sleek and efficient, the paintings make up in dazzle what they lack in durability. *Body and Soul* (2004), the best piece here, can claim neither of the title attributes, yet its icy sophistication has an undeniable allure. David Row is at the Von Lintel Gallery, 555 West 25th Street, until Oct. 9.