

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

Christian Eckart at Massimo Audiello

Under the pressure of both an emerging generation of geometric painters and the L.A. County Museum's sprawling and controversial exhibition, "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985," the relevance (or not) of religious themes to geometric abstraction looks like one of this year's Hot Topics. Christian Eckart, one of the strongest of the younger painters, seems to have surfaced at the appropriate moment, for his art seeks an iconic, "spiritual" intensity of feeling even as it ironically tests received formats and materials.

Perhaps the most immediately striking aspect of Eckart's work is his luxurious use—one wants to say exploitation—of

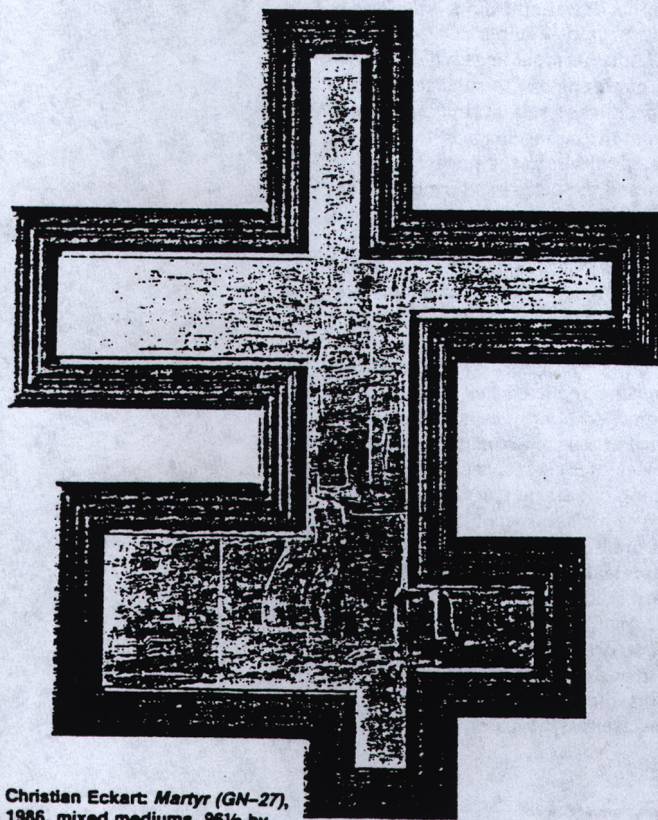
materials. Of the three sets of paintings included in this exhibition, one was of small, smooth squares of black marble inlaid with tiny geometric figures of lighter stone in the center. The inlay is so effectively crafted that at first I thought the pieces were of printed linoleum. Another group of paintings was executed on large panels of clear-lacquered wood. The wood serves as grounds for emblematic configurations of yellow bars which open to reveal small, regularly segmented chambers in isometric perspective. The open chambers alternatively suggest monastery or prison cells, stables, or armatures for model airplanes. Here again, the fabrication of the paintings refuses the character of the artist's hand. The chambered figures are as precise as decals, and all the more mysterious for their impersonal clarity.

The esthetic ground staked out by these two series is counterpointed by that of the third group—large paintings which play gesture to the romantic hilt, highlighting it in monochrome impastos of metallic paint. Not content with the iconic otherworldliness of gold or silver alone, Eckart rings Constructivist variations on the cross format itself. In their proportions, these paintings are strongly reminiscent of Keith

Milow's more compact cross-based wall sculptures seen in the Guggenheim's survey of British art a few years ago. But Eckart probably has an older artist in mind: a huge, multi-paneled collage investigation of Cimabue's crucifixes, using both reproductions and geometric slices of gold and silver tape, was one of the centerpieces of his gallery debut last season.

To what extent does Eckart mean all this? The crucifix variations are called the "Martyr Series," but they shun the bloodstains of Cimabue's Christs. The swirling crests of paint are as close as Eckart gets to evoking flesh, but the metallic paint is less transfiguring than embalming (I think of the skin-suffocation suffered by the gold-painted woman in *Goldfinger*). The surface is cropped at the edge and encased in lacquered moulding in what seems a move from the cross to the tomb. It's as though Eckart knows too much to openly appeal or accede to Malevich's "spiritual desert." Instead, he hopes to have it both ways, and create a spiritual tropics from his operatic self-consciousness. It is in this split between stylistic discursiveness and passion that his work finds its unsettling tension.

—Stephen Westfall



Christian Eckart: *Martyr (GN-27)*, 1986, mixed mediums, 96½ by 78½ inches overall; at Massimo Audiello (review on p. 147).