

Daniel Sturgis – Recent Work

Barry Schwabsky, 2004

The eye glides smoothly across the crisp, clear uninflected surfaces of Daniel Sturgis's paintings. These are the progeny of the hard-edged, or as it was sometimes called, post-painterly, abstraction of the '60s—of Ellsworth Kelly, say, or even of the late, acrylic paintings (not the classic oils) of Barnett Newman. No nuance of touch was allowed to violate the visual wholeness of such works; the pictorial gestalt was all. Of course, the same clean, dry, almost mechanically immaculate touch (a self-effacing touch but touch nonetheless) was crucial to a certain kind of Pop art as well. Think of Roy Lichtenstein's *blam!*, or of Alan D'Arcangelo's *endless highways*—images whose accelerated course from eye to brain was never impeded by the grit of adventitious detail. (I'm mentioning Americans here because I know their work best but of course there were British artists of a similar bent; Sturgis himself has expressed a strong interest in the work of the painter Jeremy Moon, who died in 1973 when he was not yet 40.)

In recent years this kind of surface has again become attractive to a fair number of younger painters. One thinks of Monique Prieto in Los Angeles, but also of an English artist like Julian Opie—an abstractionist, one might want to say, and a representationalist. But forty years on, what's changed is that the division between abstract and Pop, formalism and representation no longer looks as obvious as one might have thought it did in the '60s. Few have made as much of this as Sturgis has. His paintings raise the question whether they are narratives disguised as decoration or vice-versa; their unwillingness to finally answer such questions seems to imply that they are, in truth, neither one.

Among Sturgis's most recent paintings, *Rural Charm* is the one that concedes the most to the conventions of representational space. A strong horizontal division of the composition implies a horizon, and a pair of upright, three-pronged shapes offer themselves to be understood as something like bare trees, or perhaps cactus; in any case we're dealing with some sort of arid landscape. The parti-colored pattern of overlapping ovals running across the bottom of the canvas adds a second level of representational implication: They suggest a crowd of heads, indeed an audience. So the landscape that dominates the painting can be thought of as a landscape at one remove, as the representation of an already-merely-represented landscape, that is, a theatrical setting. Not every shape in the picture can be interpreted in terms of such one-on-one correspondences to the elements in some depicted scene—what are those four rather blocky shapes interposed between this supposed crowd of heads and that imaginable desert landscape?—but the pull toward these hints at representation is so strong that one can easily overlook such unaccountable elements.

In other paintings, however, Sturgis creates a stronger tension between abstractness and representationality. Still *Obedience*, for instance, also features a sort of horizontal division into upper and lower parts, with the former being notably clear, open, and therefore skylike. This time, however, the "crowd" of overlapping ovals does not suggest a theatrical situation—they form a mass in the landscape, if there is one, rather than before it. But this time, their pattern does not intersect the lateral edges of the canvas as with *Rural Charm*; instead, meeting its right side, the pattern executes a ninety-degree turn and continues about two-thirds of the way along. It's as though the design began at the left of the picture on the assumption that it would be following an essentially representational logic, but by the time it reached the right had given way to a purely abstract logic according to which the world described by the painting exists only within the confines of its four edges and not beyond—only to succumb to some gnawing doubt and give up altogether before finishing its course.

Why does the painting have this problem about knowing whether it should behave abstractly or representationally? Indeed, why would anyone want to make a problem that "looked" like it might be representational but was "really" abstract, or vice-versa? Probably because, for a long time now, painting has had a problem with meaning. Can't live with it, can't live without it. Representation may seem willfully naïve, while self-referential formalism seems lacking in substance. Paintings like Sturgis's don't claim to solve the problem, only to examine it. These paintings look clear, forthright, and fun, but they're full of quandaries. The eye might glide across them with aplomb but the brain dwells on them with a certain unease.

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