

FEBRUARY/ MARCH 2009

www.galleryandstudiomagazine.com

VOL. 11 No. 3 New York

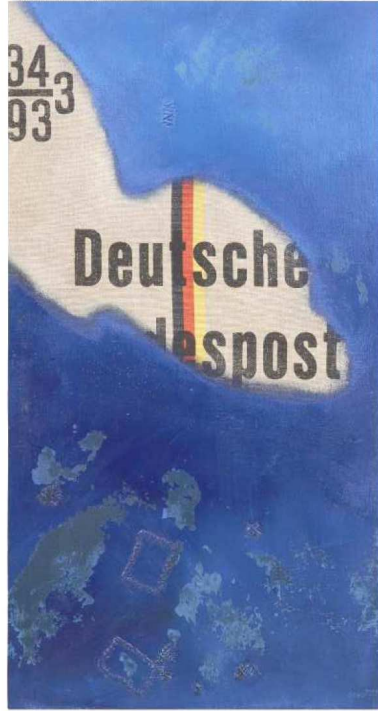
GALLERY & STUDIO

The World of the Working Artist

Stephan Stiehler: A New Approach to “Mail Art”

Much abstract painting, even at this late date, still concerns itself primarily with surfaces, denying the intangible. This may have been a necessary stance during the early modernist period, when artists were still at pains to prove that there could be intrinsic value in pure forms and colors that did not refer to actual things. And the attitude continued well into the Abstract Expressionist era, when American artists of a certain stripe became almost belligerent in their insistence that “what you see is what it is” and one avant garde art magazine was actually called “It Is.”

The advent of postmodernism, however, created a more permissive, less dogmatic climate in which it became possible for serious artists to explore new levels of meaning, even while putting primary emphasis on the formal aspects of their work. One of the more interesting recent manifestations of this newer tendency was the conceptual element that the German painter Stephan Stiehler introduced to his evocative color field paintings in a recent exhibition at Montserrat Contemporary Art Gallery, 547



“Art Mailbag Documenta No 32”

West 27th Street, in Chelsea.

The title of Stiehler’s show was “Blue Messages,” because the paintings were all executed on historical German mailbags and, as the artist explained in a catalog statement, “In their former life mailbags covered thousands of personal messages. In this case a life of a mailbag is similar to a human life. Over the whole life we are collecting thousands of messages and impressions.”

Stiehler’s ideas are in line to a certain degree with Antoni Tàpies’ notions of the “noumenal,” as it relates to the essential spirit of materials. However, his approach is more subtle, subliminal, concerned with, as he puts it, “expressing the feelings from the bottom of all experiences in life with different layers.”

One does not need to know this to appreciate Stiehler’s paintings, which are sufficiently compelling for their purely visual attributes to hold our interest, with their pregnant forms and amorphous clouds of softly modulated tonalities floating serenely over vibrant blue acrylic fields. However, the knowledge deepens one’s understanding of the artist’s intentions and provides a subtext for the coloristic and textural qualities of his lyrical abstract compositions.

Like Ad Reinhardt’s “black paintings,” Stiehler’s mailbag paintings are largely monochromatic, although some compositions are enlivened here and there with bright bursts of red and, to a lesser degree, touches of glowing green. Only in two compositions, “Art-Mailbag Documenta no. 32” and “Art-Mailbag Documenta no. 33,” are the printed phrases “Deutsche Bundespost” and the black red and yellow vertical stripes on the mailbags left partially visible, with areas of the overall blue hue clouding over and obscuring the rest of the letters.

In all of the other paintings, the particular character of each individual bag, its “life history,” so speak, is revealed in the various textures under the blue paint. These take the form of stitches, rectangular patches and other repairs that, like wrinkles or scars in human flesh, serve as poignant tactile reminders of the ravages of time, even as they simultaneously function as autonomous aesthetic components of the composition. Thus an element of chance, however modified by the artist’s eye and hand, enters into the paintings of Stephan Stiehler, who, like fellow countrymen Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer, unearths the mysterious inner life of materials.

— Marie R. Pagano