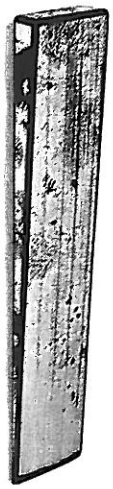


BEN DALLAS

The magic that pictures are, results when the materials used to make them are transcended bringing into being the appearance of something not actually there. This has been the illusionism of representational art and photography. I would consider myself exceptionally accomplished if my dimensional constructions with their nonobjective imagery would offer something half as powerful.

GRADIENT acrylic on wood, 12x2.25x.75", 2003

CHICAGO READER Mar. 27, 97

BEN DALLAS
at the Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art, through April 19

By Fred Camper

MAKING STRANGE

art

When Marcel Duchamp first exhibited such ready-made objects as a urinal, he changed art making forever. Many artists started to rely less on form and composition and more on the idea of "making strange"—creating works unusual enough in themselves to be expressive. At worst such art simply seeks novelty for its own sake, but at best an odd presence creates a kind of statement.

Ben Dallas paints designs on delicate wood constructions—thin rectangular slabs or V-shaped forms—creating something between painting and sculpture; but only if pressed, he told me, would he say they're "paintings that are sculptural." The painted patterns hardly create unified compositions, however. The tall, thin, rectangular *Gradient*—the larger of two works with that title, out of seven at the Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art—is dark at the top with a fuzzy gray-brown pattern of diagonal streaks at eye level. Lower down it becomes darker but with occasional bright streaks and splotches seemingly randomly distributed. But as one views this "painting"—over seven feet high but only four and five-eighths inches wide—from the side, one notices that the thickness varies from two and a half inches at the top to a quarter inch at the bottom; returning to the front, one sees that this dark structure comes slightly out from the wall as it rises, tilting a bit ominously toward the viewer.

Like the other six pieces, this one seems deeply hermetic. Neither painting nor sculpture, it contains painted patterns that are neither obviously ordered nor completely random; at times they seem about to coalesce into a composition, and at others Dallas seems to be working against all imagery. The work's forward thrust makes it seem a bit intimidating, yet it's so thin and devoid of unified designs that imagining it as an icon or monument might occasion a wan smile. It seems almost divided against itself. In effect the viewer's encounter with it becomes the work: one vacillates between looking at it from the front and the sides, as painted composition or wooden slab, as monument or a mocking of monuments. Yet its refusal to define itself becomes a statement: as one interrogates it for meaning, conflicting answers reshape the slab into a giant question mark.

Dallas, 54, a Chicagoan who grew up mostly in Indiana, recalls that while he took some art classes before college, he knew almost nothing about contemporary art. The fact that his older brother was born with a shortened spine and enlarged head, among other problems, affected him "both negatively and positively—the physical presence of my brother expanded my notions of what people can be." Working in the National Gallery of Art in Washington after college brought him into close contact with old master paintings for the first time: "I was in awe of the marks in Rembrandts and Vermeers—they were readable as being on, and simultaneously in, the surface. They had a tendency to glow." Studying art history, which he now teaches at William Rainey Harper College in Palatine, he says has affected the art he makes now: "It's a result of me continuously being concerned intellectually with the nature of art." In the 80s Dallas's art was largely conceptual, with a humorous bent. For one piece, he says, "I took surveys of what an artist should wear," asking participants to vote for one of three shirts. He also made paintings about "my anxiety about painting." Then, about eight years ago, "I started giving in to something that I didn't nor-

"SPLITS" (DETAIL) BY BEN DALLAS

mally do—just making things that looked good to me. I made things that I was willing to work on until they took on some kind of life, a power."

The power of *Turn*, like that of *Gradient*, comes in part from its strangeness—from the way it evades being either an object or a picture. A largely black four-foot-tall rectangle only three and a half inches wide, it's covered in its upper half with a barely visible grid resembling an accounting ledger. Midway down a pattern of dark brown concentric arcs emerges against a light tan ground; their color isn't all that different from the inky darkness from which they seem to have come. Were these circles completed, they'd be a lot wider than the picture, suggesting that this is a fragment of some larger continuum. Yet their repetitiveness—they were made using a stencil Dallas cut—is almost decorative. Straining to see the whole, one comes up with such images as spider webs at dusk and multiple sunsets, images seemingly encouraged by the arcs' mysterious connection with darkness but discouraged by the pale, smudgy colors and lines. Ultimately the spectator is thrown back on the impenetrability of the art object: each of these sui generis works denies interpretation.

The peculiar quality Dallas gives his surfaces contributes to the works' mystery. Covering his marks with wax, adding new marks using carbon paper and transparent stains, sanding, or buffing, he creates patterns that are at once thrusting and recessed. These designs and the works' three-dimensionality force the viewer to spend time with them; Dallas even paints on the thin sides of *Gradient*; others offer wider edges. *Fold* could be described as a long thin slab folded over on itself, implying motion, opening or closing. A complex black-ink design made with a rubber stamp resembles both random blots and Japanese *sumi-e* ink painting; peering around a bit to see inside the fold reveals a checkerboard pattern lower down and dark brushwork above it. Is the piece opening or closing? What is the relationship between the ink design and the checkerboard?

What I like most about Dallas's works is the way that, almost despite themselves, they're poetic. His denial of a singular identity is what brings them to life. Consider *Splits*, a group of seven small pieces of wood mounted on a wall, one in the center and six in an asymmetrical circle around it. Each piece is an inverted V, a bit like a clothespin or salad tongs; each offers Dallas four different surfaces to paint on—the tops and bottoms of the V—and must be seen from various angles, since the edge facing the viewer is so thin it's negligible. The one angle that seems best for viewing *Splits* is almost unobtainable, though one can press one's head against the wall and try. Attempting to figure out these birds in flight decorated with colors and smudgy circles made me feel more alive. ■

THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE - APRIL 18, 96

The act of making their marks

Dallas and Hopkins take their audiences back to basics

By Alan G. Artner
TRIBUNE ART CRITIC

In recent years the Evanston Art Center has mounted some impressive shows of abstract work from Chicago-area artists but none stronger than the one for Ben Dallas and Michael Hopkins.

Its strength is directly related to the visual qualities of the work itself, for Dallas and Hopkins are formalists who require no extra-artistic means to convey what

Art review

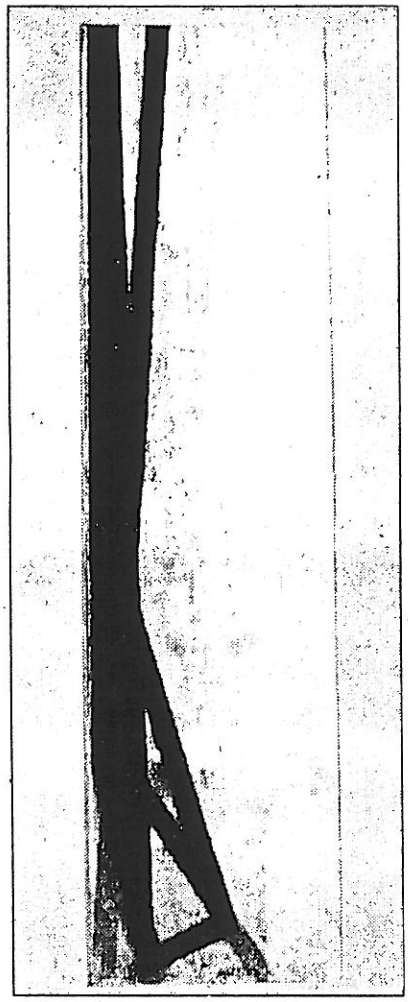
they're doing. Everything that gives their work purpose will be readily perceivable by a sensitive viewer.

This kind of exhibition brings us back to the very basis of painting and drawing, namely, the act of making marks on one or another kind of support. The particular support combined with the variety of marks and the artists' skill in placing them determines quality. Nothing else matters.

Dallas' support is a fairly narrow strip of wood, vertically wall-mounted. One end projects from the wall more than the other. Some pieces are wedges; others, flatter for most of their length, incorporate a single bend or fold.

The artist sparingly paints the surfaces and sides of his supports in patches. He also incises delicate lines that may run the entire length of the piece. Chromatic adjustments, either to the color of the wood or among the painted patches, is extremely subtle.

Dallas' bent and folded works exist in a realm between painting and sculpture, as did Barnett Newman's narrowest "zip" pieces, which clearly are antecedents. But there the resemblances end. Dallas' shaped abstract paintings are his own—odd, unpredictable, meticulous and sometimes fussy yet possessed of a visual logic that withholds them from becoming merely eccentric.

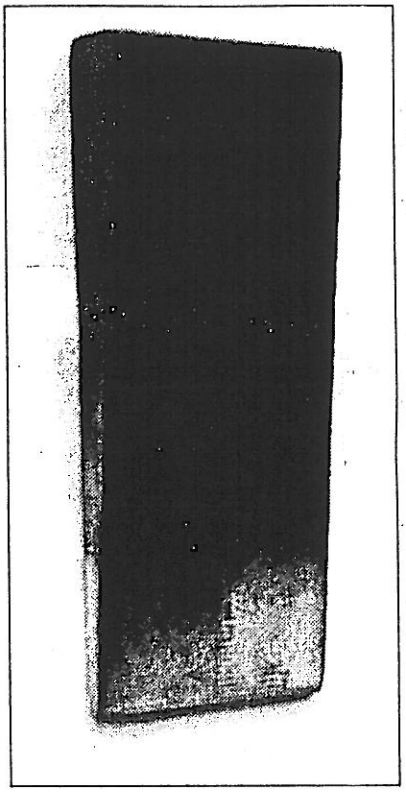


BTE Galleries

Michael Hopkins draws in charcoal or paints in gouache and prefers narrow formats.

Hopkins draws in charcoal or paints with opaque watercolor in a method known as gouache. Like Dallas, he here prefers long, narrow formats, though he deploys them both horizontally and vertically.

All Hopkins' lines are straight and clustered to form thick bars. Some works—in an apparent but undeclared series—prop the bars at the left edge of tan, white or ivory papers. Other pieces have the bars meeting at right angles, like walls in an architect's blueprint.



BTE Galleries

Ben Dallas' bent and folded works exist in a realm between painting and sculpture.

The charcoal drawings have a furriness of line that conspires with inevitable smudges and smears to soften the severity of Hopkins' discourse. The gouaches achieve something of the same effect through muted color.

Antecedents are the chastely ravishing drawings by Bernar Venet, though Hopkins' begin more severely and achieve winning individuality through an intimacy based in part on their comparative smallness.

The exhibition continues at 2603 Sheridan Rd., Evanston, through May 15.