

IMMEDIACY REDIVIVUS: MICHAEL DAVID'S PAINTINGS

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The best abstract painting seems “nothing short of miraculous,” the French poet and critic Yves Bonnefoy remarks, for it satisfies “the desire for the immediate”¹—for pure sensation, uncorrupted by consciousness of meaning. Bonnefoy thinks that the experience of immediacy—of pure presence, directly given, with no need for language to shape it into comprehension (and mute its impact)—is an illusion. It is a private myth — magical thinking--that has been given social credibility, ironically by the need to escape social pressure. The “conventional readings of the world” are not so much defeated as complicated by the mirage of immediacy, he argues. They need a codicil explaining why the belief in immediacy must be abandoned, however reluctantly. Bonnefoy doesn't want to wait for the feeling of immediacy to fade away, as it will inevitably do because it is inherently transient, but discredits it as a subjective indulgence. Looking at it from the disillusioning point of view of everyday reality, he implies that we must distrust the spontaneity with which it appears, thus undermining it before we can savor it, and reap its emotional benefits. He has no interest in the way it enriches the feeling for life, reminding us that there is life beyond everyday life. Bonnefoy never imagines that the experience of immediacy cannot be conventionalized—that it is not meant to be “read,” and in fact cannot be read in worldly terms. He seems to think that we should have intellectual guilt every time we experience an abstract painting as sheer immediacy— eternally present, as it were, and as such suspended beyond time. We should “qualify” this “mystical” experience—peculiarly “metaphysical” for all its physicality—by analyzing it away, that is, use our minds to purge it as a lie and hallucination.

Michael David's abstract paintings renew immediacy, indeed, reconstitute, strengthen, and even apotheosize it. They raise it to a feverishly fresh intensity with their remarkable touch, indicating they are among the very best painterly abstractions made. To me they make it transparently clear that immediacy may be an illusion to the intellect but it is not one for the senses—for touch and sight, mingled together inextricably in

¹ Yves Bonnefoy, “On Painting and Poetry, On Anxiety and Peace,” *The Lure and the Truth of Painting*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 171

ecstatic perception. For them, painterly immediacy is ultimate reality: pure sensuous intensity transcendent of ordinary, habitual understanding of the world, which is mediated by socially sanctioned language and banal meanings that force sense experience into their procrustean bed.

David may be the most innovative master of immediate surface since the Abstract Expressionists. He has acknowledged his debt to Abstract Expressionism, but he has transformed it. Where the Abstract Expressionist paintings of the forties and fifties seem like modern cave paintings, as their crude, unfocused, often meandering, turbulent painterliness suggests, and as such to reinstate prehistory, David seems to turn the cave into a temple, as his more considered, concentrated, indeed, dense, contemplative painterliness indicates, so that his paintings have the aura of post history. The sublime is gained with no loss of force—no sacrifice of painterly dynamics. Indeed, there is a gain in the sense of bodiliness: each of his works has a certain “body”—density of presence—so that it seems to embody the sublime, not simply evoke it. His paintings make the abstract sublime vividly concrete, as though it could be grasped rather than existed as some numinous beyond.

The challenge of gestural abstract painting is to break through the barrier of reflection—we put it up to keep ourselves at a certain mental distance from the world, so that our immediate impressions of it do not overwhelm us, and to sort them out and organize them into coherent and practical patterns—by developing a dramatic immediacy of surface. When the breakthrough occurs, as in David’s abstractions, it restores the lability of sensuous appetite natural to the human body, but that the human mind has repressed for the sake of worldly functioning. David’s powerful, deeply felt, boldly visceral gesturalism embodies this appetite in the act of arousing it: his painterly immediacy has prereflective sensuous appeal, which is why it seems preternaturally fresh—uniquely vital, however at times, morbid. The blackness of *Refuge* (all works 2000) certainly seems morbid, however many traces of bright color—mostly orange, but also bits of red and yellow, as though the orange was disintegrating into its components—erratically break through the dark surface, which seems generally disintegrated. David tells me that he sometimes uses as many as ten “rounds” of paint—the word is telling, suggesting that for him painting is a kind of boxing, that is, in Harold Rosenberg’s famous words, the canvas has become an arena of self-confrontation, indicating the amount of combative energy he puts into it—to build up his surface. For all its solidity, it has a fragile, fragmented look, in part because of the beading of the wax emulsion with

which he paints. But, if Rosenberg is right, it also tells us something about David's sense of self. Building up that looks like tearing down—construction that looks like destruction—is in fact the emotional as well as physical substance of David's painting. Plane of canvas is placed upon plane of canvas, creating a three-tiered pyramidal architecture that has a family resemblance to an Aztec temple—but an abandoned and ruined one, as its stripped and above all blackened appearance suggests. Nonetheless—and this is the essential paradox of David's paintings—this fundamental, melancholy structure is kept alive by the immediacy and vigor of the paint that at the same time signals the decay and death which mark it.

The tension between the physical immediacy of the paint and its geometrical underpinning—between gesture and structure, interpenetrating, so that structure seems less fixed, as though in insecure process, and texture more fixed, as though absolutized in amber—keeps the work dialectically alive. And embedded in this immediacy, like an ironical beacon, is a black cross, its arms lengthened until they blur into the painterly ground. It arises like an epiphany from the mire of agitated blackness—a dark epiphany, as it were, confirming the darkness of the paint. The projection of the geometry—the painting is a relief, even as the relief is a pure painting—thrusts the flat cross forward, so that it confronts us, but it remains an abstract vision—our ambiguous vision. David's painting is a kind of negative icon, composed of crushed gestures. I cannot help thinking of George Steiner's remark that "our aesthetic forms explore the void, the blank freedom which come of the retraction (*Deus absconditus*) of the messianic and divine."² He argues that where art, in its "kinship...with the calling on mystery in the matter of the world and of man"—the mystery in matter itself, one might add—once "enact[ed] the epiphany of a real presence," it now reveals the "encounter with a 'real absence'." Steiner thinks that this is what we see in Malevich and Ad Reinhardt. We must add David to the list of these great abstractionists, for he has shown us that real [material] presence can also be real [spiritual] absence. Immediacy can be made to serve the purposes of absence and loss as well as presence and givenness.

Because David's paintings convey both simultaneously, we are forced to ask whether he means to suggest that there are hidden sparks of life (vital colors) in the ashes of the dead symbol or whether he is flatly stating—as the blunt, recessed flatness with which the cross is given suggests—that it is irremediably dead. Is the cross a phoenix or

² George Steiner, *Real Presences*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 229

Lazarus in the process of rising from the grave (it is “engraved” in the flatness, as though in a grave, perhaps an empty one), or it is a ghost that however haunting confirms the triumph of death? Is David struggling to restore the traditional symbol of salvation or is he showing the permanent ruin that it has become—confirming that it is also a symbol of suffering unto death? Does his cross still have the miraculous power to absolve us of our sins or is it a black mirage that mocks us, deepening our guilt? Does it symbolize the depth of suffering—a new emotional dark age—or is it a consoling omen of resurrection—a promise of purity, a blessing in disguise? Is it a shadow with no substance, or is its substance hidden



Fig.1, Michael David: Chorten 777, 2006, Sponges encased in wax and oil pigment on wood, 60 x 51 inches

in the painterly shadows? Refuge, clearly, is an ironical title. Part of the greatness of David’s painting is that it can raise these existential questions—that it can suggest our fundamental uncertainty about ourselves, indeed, our ambivalence about being. David’s black cross—his whole painting—is emotionally profound as well as brilliantly conceived. In general, his paintings are emotionally eschatological, that is, they articulate inescapable emotional concerns. But everything is not tragic bleakness—demiurgic blackness—in David’s oeuvre.

Mourning and melancholy are overcome: gnostic illumination occurs in the subtle, progressive transition (as I see it) from Population (Dark Blues) through Population (Orange) to Population (Blue). Darkness is transformed to light by its passage through color, which recedes into seductive mist. Restoration, with its open white surface through which strong, passionate color appears, and Brooke, with a white surface that veils darkness—it is overcome, however much it threatens to break through—confirm the momentum of the process, which began with the almost completely closed black surface of Refuge. Finally there is the marvel of 777, with its pure white luminosity,



Fig.2, Michael David: *Population Blue Green*, 2001,
30x26x10 inches, oil, wax on wood

completing the process of transfiguration—confirming salvation, liberation from the fatalistic black, the dark, the defeated. Death has lost its sting, and been replaced by eternal light.

The tension between light and dark has been resolved—the victory belongs to the forces of light. (With the exception of *Population (Dark Blues)* and *Population (Orange)*, which are flat field paintings, all these works have the same pyramidal structure and painterly density as *Refuge*.) Yet the tension generated by the breakthrough of underpainting—the friction between surface and surface-within-surface—remains, however subliminally, as the bits of

unanointed structure that appear near the bottom of 777 and the subliminal, impacted darkness of Brooke suggest. Simply on the level of color relationships David's paintings are astonishing feats of subtlety—a delicate blending of incommensurate colors, making the spectrum freshly sensuous, all the more so because of the gestural state of the colors. Sensation has become transcendence in these works, physical density confirms spiritual purity. At the same time, there is an indwelling disturbance, signaled by the rupture in the surface, through which the depth is glimpsed. Painterly magma erupts through this fissure, almost covering it over: surface and depth reconcile in the fluidity, healing their difference while acknowledging it. Whether my gnostic interpretation is right or wrong—whether these works are masterpieces of sacred paintings, as I think—they are all aesthetic masterpieces. They restore immediacy to credibility after it has become a decadent convention.

What began to be worked by Kandinsky and seemed overworked in Pollock, and finally exhausted by expressionistic overuse, has been given not only a new lease on life by David, but extended into new technical as well as emotional territory. Flatness is

“architected,” as it were, so that it becomes a platform for the painterliness that finesses it, even as that painterliness is made more “forward” by it. David has regenerated painterliness without making it seem precious, even as he refined it so that it is no longer raw, primitive, headlong, naively aggressive. The primordial effect of immediacy remains, even as gesture seems deliberate as well as spontaneous. Indeed, the effect of immediacy—the epiphany that is immediacy—is all the stronger, when it occurs, because of the contradiction. For the tension between spontaneity and deliberateness—instinctive power and reflective control—makes the breakthrough into immediacy, the demonstration of the immanence of immediacy, all the more moving and convincing. It becomes a breakthrough into integrity, rather than a pro forma exercise in painterly skill. Thus, David’s paintings concentrate in themselves the history of modernist painting without selling its emotional possibilities short, as happened when it dead-ended in post-painterly abstraction. All one has to do is look at his works on paper, with their evocative modulations of tone and surface—their perfection of subtlety—to realize the truth of this. They are masterpieces of unresolved tension—presence and absence compete in them, even as they seem to converge—showing how intimate abstraction can be. Clearly painting will never die, if David has anything to say about it.