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A Philosophical Thread Tying Two Styles Together

By Eric Ernst

Making my way through the current exhibition at the Drawing Room Gallery in East Hampton, I was reminded of the subtle though persistent relationships between abstraction and representational artwork, despite their obvious technical differences. These associations transcend superficial dissimilarities, leading to the recognition that, as the sculptor Constantin Brancusi once noted, "that which they call abstract is the most realistic, because what is real is not totally exterior but the idea, the essence of things." This



Costantino Nivola's "N27," on view at the Drawing Room.

concept echoes throughout the Drawing Room exhibition, which encompasses a broad spectrum of individual stylistic approaches while continually returning to the idea that, beyond their superficial differences, each artist expresses Jean Helion's observation that both abstraction and representational work exists "as an attempt to feed imagination with a world built through the basic sensations of the eyes."

This is particularly apparent in considering pieces by Jennifer Bartlett, whose early works emphasized grid motifs superimposed over recognizable imagery, the combination creating, as the writer Marlena Donohoe stated, "formal armatures intended to tie experience—the artist's making and the viewer's viewing—tightly and literally to the flat picture plane."

In "Air: 24 Hours, 9 P.M." (1993), Ms. Bartlett's use of the grid motif is less dense than in others from the same series, allowing for a more relaxed visual sensation in which the various figurative components in the

work are able to assert themselves, with none completely dominating the composition. Nevertheless, the geometric segmentation of the surface serves to alter the manner in which the viewer sees the objects, creating a myriad of small paintings, each of which elicits different responses without altering the rhythmic narrative of the image as a whole.

By contrast, two other works, "Amangansett, December" (2002) and "July, Aspen" (1999), conjure a similar narrative sensation, but do so through powerful juxtapositions of light and color as well as the insistent though restrained manner Ms. Bartlett uses to physically divide the canvas between earth and sky.

The primacy of geometric forms also dominates the work of Jack Youngerman, although here their impact derives from the combination of elegant forms that balance the visual import of the structure while gaining the greatest power from the artist's use of negative space, what Gertrude Stein once called "pretty air."

In "Step Twist" (Baltic birch plywood, 1995-2000), for example, the initial impact of the geometric and mathematical aspects of the carefully carved spiral are initially perceived in those areas that are a product of the artist's hand. Upon further reflection, though, the empty space within takes on its own measure of physicality and the distinctions between positive and negative space become completely blurred.

While the tension between positive and negative space is a fac-



Jennifer Bartlett's pastel on paper, "Amangansett, December" (2002), is on view at the Drawing Room.

tor that exists within the physical confines of Mr. Youngerman's works, Bryan Hunt's elegantly twisted white sculpture, much like Brancusi's iconographic "Bird in Space," seems to occupy its own universe with the entire surrounding environs serving as the unstated and unsculpted component. Interestingly, this effect is underscored and emphasized by a preliminary drawing of the same work that hangs nearby, with the sensually weaving coil accentuated by the thin monochromatic wash that isolates it in the picture plane but which also physically re-creates the sensation of empty space around the central image.

Caio Fonseca's "PO8.11" (gouache on paper, 2008) elicits a similar visual response from the viewer in that the harmonically arranged images might seem to float in space were it not for the gentle dotted lines

that occupy the areas between them. Serving to orchestrate the relationships between the assertive red vertical elements, their geometric structuring is so delicate as to be almost subliminal, with the final effect appearing as a dreamy evocation of a cartographer's astronomical musings.

Costantino Nivola's series of small bronze sculptures educates a sense of mysterious ambiguity that is as powerful as that achieved by Mr. Fonseca, but finds its spiritual and mysterious elements more closely tied to traditional European and Mediterranean perspectives relating to humankind's relationship to nature as a sacred source.

Also featured are works by Laurie Lambrecht, Raja Ram Sharma, Stephen Antonakos, and Drew Shiflet. The exhibition at the Drawing Room continues through April 11.