

ALEXANDRE GALLERY

Gregory Amenoff's paintings are adventures without narrative. Adventure is the soul's condition in life, narration a mincing habit of the ego. Only an art as concrete and silent as painting can make the distinction real to us, so egoistic is the temper of our collective life now. Socially and inwardly, we are addicted to the distractions of narrative as to an anesthetic. Whole industries see to it we are oversupplied with "news," gossip, ideology. The welter of stories we hear, read, and tell ourselves each day deafens us to the fact that their major themes are judgments upon people, events, and ideas no one is in a position to judge. And the intoxication of countless unearned judgments keeps us from thinking clearly about what our real position is. Because I understand our cultural condition in this way, I have been unable to welcome the general fashion for narrative painting that has been art news for the past few years. We don't need from art cheap incitements to fabricate more jejune stories about what we see: we're doing that compulsively already. We need instead to learn how to turn our attention at will to the unstoried, unthought actuality of life that our dithering only obscures. That is the kind of effort to which Amenoff's art lends itself.

People often approach Amenoff's work as if it were a kind of guessing game defying them to put names to improbable forms and incidents. They desecrate in the paintings vestiges of natural reality: branches, tendrils, shells, a stream, an isthmus, a stony ridge. Critics too hasten to tame the pictures by supplying them a formal ancestry, citing Dove, Burchfield, and Ryder, or early Mondrian, Hodler, and Van Gogh. Amenoff has certainly pondered works by these artists, and I share the impulse of other critics to compliment his art by the mention of theirs. However, the search for allusions, depictive or historical, is too often an evasion of the paintings' real challenge to us: to see without naming. Only by trying to do this can we sense how many assumptions, how many ossified judgments are implicit in the definition of something by a name. The artist himself knows the difficulty well. To silence his own discursive judgment, he typically paints with music playing very loud. Only by drowning out his own inner voices can he sustain the unpremeditated activity from which the indeterminate qualities of his art arise. His paintings have no narrative structure or meaning because he contrives to keep from telling himself what he is doing as he paints. Looking at the ambiguous, image-like pictures he makes, we can sense the narrative drive in our own attention.

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The spaces in Amenoff's paintings seem to me thrown open. I cannot help entering into them, and the feeling of doing so is often harrowing. It is an imaginative experience of disorientation, loss of scale and bearings. Unlike realist paintings, for example which describe a world held intact by gravity, these paintings evoke no principle or force for coherence, however figural individual forms in them may appear. Pictures such as *Radix* and *In the Fifth Season* seem to conflate aerial, transverse, and frontal views, and the scale of the forms in them appears to fluctuate wildly as my attention ranges among them. Ambiguities like these are checked only by the material facts of paint on canvas, to which I can always turn for relief from the tension of engagement with an image.

In the new paintings, Amenoff has given even more energy to the uncertainties of scale by working different areas with brushes of varying sizes. It is striking to see, in pictures so vigorously painted, how forcefully and consistently image overwhelms the undisguised evidence of process.

For artist and spectator alike, art is a means of isolating aspects of life so they can be thought about. Amenoff's paintings are so many efforts to isolate and share an elusive yet universal property of the physical world: its utter foreignness to the mind. Even the body belongs more to the world than to the mind, as we prove daily by abandoning it to sleep. The ominous, visceral character of Amenoff's images can induce a shudder with the thought that they contain no human figures because they correspond to inner reaches of the body that are mercifully hidden from consciousness.

It is easy to forget how alien the world is by dwelling more in notions, memories, and fantasies than in the present moment. Yet there is something in us that never loses sight of the ultimate spookiness and tenuousness of our existence, which is what I mean by saying adventure is the soul's condition in life. Amenoff's art abstracts into pictorial form the vividness of reality as it appears when we face its primary mindlessness. Consciousness may collapse into pure need of the world, as Sartre has described so well, but the world, looked at calmly, seems never to need consciousness, much less one's personal mentality. The terror of mingling this view with the belief that the body is one's ultimate vantage point may be the emotional theme of the picture called *Deceit*.

Growth is the controlling metaphor in Amenoff's paintings—whether or not we see them as figurative—because growth is the paradigm of something happening of itself.

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Things grow in nature, like cells in the body, unsustained by anyone's conscious intentions. Amenoff strives to turn the activity of painting into an analogy of this process, with remarkable success. Although many people persist in seeing his work as expressionistic, what I admire most about it is its expansive, impersonal quality. He achieves this quality with no sacrifice of lush, painterly detail.

It is the large quotient of nonsense in the process of existence that Amenoff tries to evoke by painting as he does. His pictures translate quite directly reality's character of being neither aimless nor not aimless, for that is exactly how his paintings appear in formal terms. Even if they cannot be pinpointed, the signs of struggle seem to pervade his pictures. Each work presents itself, like a day, as *something to be gone through*, whatever it happens to contain.

There is another aspect of experience abstracted in Amenoff's art that is easier to grasp in some pictures than in others. Nearly every painting he makes has a territorial look. And some, such as *The Space Between*, also seem quite map-like. One of the liabilities of the human situation, as Wittgenstein pointed out, is that we will "confuse the map with the territory," that is, mistake the mind's own constructs for features of the world. In a picture like *The Space Between*, Amenoff seems unselfconsciously to have illustrated the possibility of this confusion. But every painting of his that succeeds presents us with the feeling of not knowing where we belong, or whether we belong, in what we see.

The themes and moods I have ascribed to Amenoff's art rest on his intuitive understanding of painting's capacity to generalize. The medium itself puts everything in a picture on an equal footing, though illusionism can always be used to disguise the fact. Amenoff translates his understanding of these matters directly by "behaving in paint," and so has been able to make art that throws aspects of the world into relief without the rhetoric of description. A feeling of ruthless clarity this emerges from the work despite its mysteries. My favorite pictures materialize this feeling unforgettably as an odd, cold, moon-like light.

Kenneth Baker

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