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Paintings that power the imagination

By Kenneth Baker
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When I saw the previous series of paintings Mike Henderson presented at Haines, I guessed that they might have had the studio wall - a catchall for notes and memorabilia - as a subliminal subject.

While splendid 2009 pictures such as "I Will Remind You" and "Around the Curve" chime with that view, I see Henderson's latest work as abstracting something broader: the power of even an imageless painting to engender a sense of place and occasion.

The best figurative paintings achieve this depictively, by describing or fictionalizing a moment and a setting. But the sense of eventfulness arises much more seldom, and perhaps more subjectively, with abstraction.

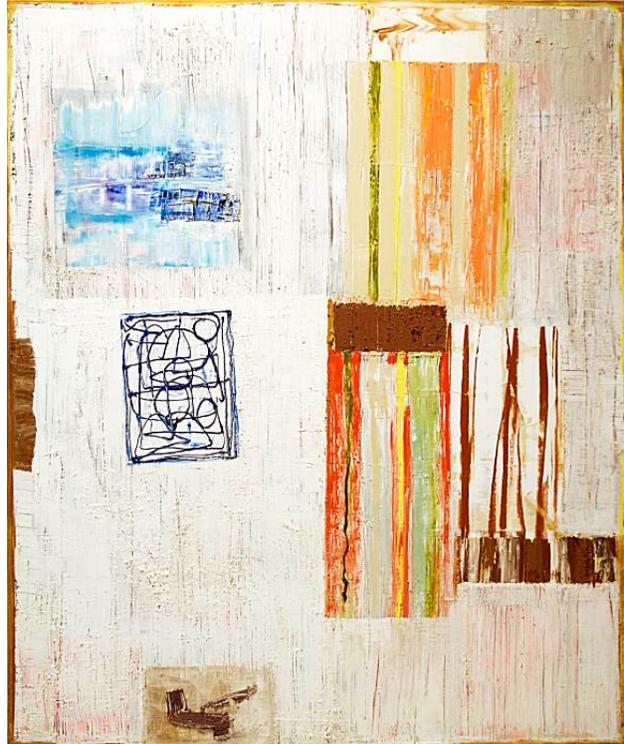
It may depend on scale or on amplitude of color - think of Barnett Newman's "Vir Heroicus Sublimis" (1950-51). Or even on a strategic gesture such as the slamming shut of pictorial space in "The Dylan Painting" by Brice Marden, on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

But Henderson's paintings each engender the sense of having reached a destination when we meet them by offering us the feeling of standing in his shoes, facing a door or scribbling on a wall, or simply enjoying being face-to-face with the stuff and challenges of painting.

Whether he toys with symbols or rehearses future pictures in small, pleasure always seems to power Henderson's efforts. By situating us where he stands, as his pictures seem to do, they almost automatically transmit a taste of that enjoyment.

The spiral recurrent in Henderson's paintings may refer to the grooves of LP records - jazz is his avocation - but it and other scrawl on his pictures' surfaces evoke a range of possible artistic predecessors.

As Henderson's canvases invite us sensuously to mime his reach as he touched them with palette knives or either end of a brush, stepped back for a look and stepped in again, they evoke by allusion his historical position as a painter and ours as viewers.



Mike Henderson's imageless abstract painting, "I Will Remind You" (2009), oil on canvas.