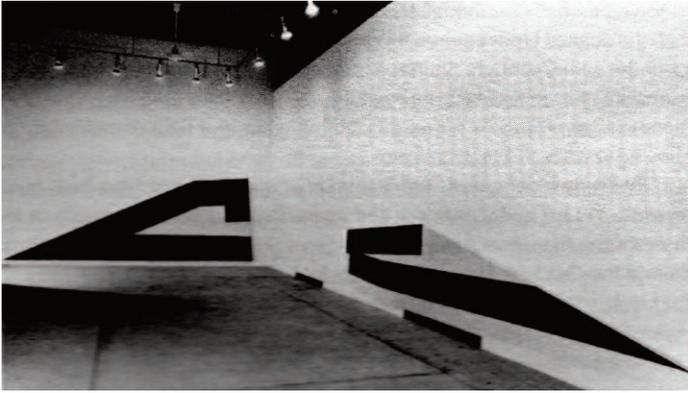


TED STAMM AT THE FAR TURN

ESSAY BY WILLIAM ZIMMER



Ted Stamm: Installation view of October 1982 exhibition at Harm Bouckart Gallery. Left: *SLDR-001*, 1982, oil on canvas, 67 x 185 inches, Right: *ZCT-002*, 1982, oil on canvas, 30 x 210 inches.

The Stoic is one who considers, with neither panic nor indifference, that the field of possibilities available to him is large perhaps, or small perhaps, but closed. — Hugh Kenner, *The Stoic Comedians*

The painting of Ted Stamm is perfectly pitched at a couple of off-canvas dictates. One is that art in reproduction should look every bit as good as the original. To this end, Stamm limits himself to black and white or raw canvas—and flatness. The second is a corollary: the artist should have the same presence as his art.

Stamm's painting is a fraternal twin of himself. Stamm dresses in black. In winter the mainstay of his uniform is a black leather jacket with sharp lapels; the warm weather model is in polished cotton with a rounded collar. He has about nine pairs of black jeans and many white T-shirts. By so identifying his self with his painting Stamm exacerbates the issue of how art relates to life.

Stamm scatters dictates freely. Some bounce like pebbles but others land like seed, and grow in relevance upon consideration. One of his more fertile axioms is that paintings should be structured *a priori* rather than composed on the canvas. "I would get all tangled up if I had to decide where a mark should go on the spot." Such structuring entails elimination of evocative color or cubist space and even of the love of painting. "Otherwise you end up with an old Fabian song and who wants that!" But in calling for the elimination of romance, Stamm paradoxically becomes the

quintessential romantic. He can't efface his own image; the self is innate in these lean, athletic paintings.

Stamm's own trim physique (and incidentally that of his too-skinny cat Ubu) share with the paintings the quality of bodies poised to spring. Stamm acknowledges that he has much in common with young figurative painters who paint figures in psychologically tight situations. "Across the board," he declares, "figurative painters are better than the abstract painters now exhibiting."

Although Stamm maintains that he is not inspired by real life, the world around him, the rhythms of that life somehow penetrate his black armor. For instance he gets ecstatic over the rear windows of automobiles. The shapes of some of these windows become the basis for new series of painted shapes. This indulgence allows nostalgia to creep in. He reveres his 1967 Falcon Sprint, and the peculiar lines of that car have figured in structuring his painting.

At bottom Stamm's style might be called hard-edged nostalgia. Many have noted this dislocation in the style of the 1950s: its representative, gestural paintings were loose, even messy, while the Detroit products were streamlined all sharp fin and chrome. In a sense, Stamm is performing a corrective, making a '50s art that matches that decade's technology.

He favors artists of the '50s. His closest inspirations have been Ad Reinhardt ("for obvious reasons"), Jackson Pollock ("he opened a door and closed it"), and Frank Kline ("once he got the painting down he didn't busy himself with the surface"). But Stamm doesn't harbor any of the existential angst of his heroes. His is the '50s of his rock and roll youth. "They all listened to jazz; even Stella [Stamm regards Frank Stella as a composer] listened to jazz. I listen to rock and roll."

Repetition, the basis of rock and roll, is also what endgames are about. An endgame ensues from that point in a chess match where neither side can win and only an elaborated going-over of the same territory is possible. The shifts produce different patterns but nothing radically new.

The endgame is a fiction, something that allows a painter to work because crucial decisions are made for him. But when real-life autobiographical referents turn up, they work to soften the art to make it more appealing. They give it a hook. The series of paintings that are basically a rectangle with an attached rectangle are called Woosters. Stamm lives on Wooster Street.

The paintings with a tail are Dodgers and the prototype drawing was done in Brooklyn where Stamm was born. The look of the Dodgers has changed drastically, as Chevrolets did year by year in the '50s, but it still retains its Dodger characteristics.

The centerpieces of Ted Stamm's exhibition this fall are two long needle-nosed *Dodgers*. The imagery—black bars on one wrapping the perimeter of the support, and on the other, suspended so that one black chunk sits like sculpture—seems too hefty for the supports which taper at the tail. My first reading was that Stamm had resorted to illusionism; I thought the top image had to overlap the bottom to fit on the support. Stamm avers he never considered this. The bottom bar tapers to an accommodating notch into which the top fits as in sexual coupling, albeit acrobatically as in yoga. In the early *Dodgers* the notched tail was part of the support; now the notch is painted but there is consistency. (Incidentally, *Dodger* is now abbreviated to CDD.)

The notion of endgame is somewhat highbrow. A more down-to-earth analogy is the auto race. "I always listen to the Indy 500 from start 'til finish. I don't leave the house until it's over. At Indy you go 500 miles and very few can make it to the end, although you just keep going round and round. It's basically a circular track; it's not the Grand Prix."

Ingenuity is the key to pulling ahead and winning. The new look of the *Dodgers* illustrates this absorption with negotiating tight situations. Whether what goes on at the tail is claustrophobic or libidinous, there is bracing tension in Stamm's recent work.

It should be mentioned, while we're in our sports clothes, that Stamm is also a baseball fan, though the intuition required for that game is rangier than the dogged kind required for driving at Indy. As much as with the strategy of the game, though, Stamm is preoccupied with trying to improve the teams' images, particularly through the styling of their uniforms. One of his more radical proposals is that the visiting team in a tight pennant race be allowed to wear all-black uniforms.

By his own definition, Ted Stamm is a "bad boy artist," but he is quick to wink. Yet his audaciousness and aggressiveness certainly match or top those of the figurative painters he admires. His painting will probably be there at the checkered flag because it is fueled by sources both high and low. It is brash, in part, but it also possesses great *élan*, and above all, clarity.