

SURELY, TEMPLE BLACK

BY WILLIAM ZIMMER

Ted Stamm

The Clocktower

1014 Leonard Street, through March 7

Don't consign Ted Stamm's paintings to mere minimalism, at least not for more than a minute or two. There's a lot lurking under his coats of black—a deeper layer more intuitive and felt than formalistic.

And this 11 painting exhibition surveys a career more talked about than seen. It opens with an august and classical painting from 1972: flecks of color revealed beneath black. But one gets the feeling that if the black could be stripped away, there would be a whole Clifford Still forest underneath.

With *Kiffman's Roll* (1973), we have the first evidence of Stamm's stated preference for "selecting rather than inventing." He would often ask friends to spin a roulette wheel to determine the kinds and number of black coats to apply. Stamm has also said that the proportions of the first panel of *Kiffman's Roll* (5 x 4 1/2') were determined by a baseball score: A's 10, Yankees 9. Similarly, football routs have yielded lopsided proportions that Stamm has accepted and worked with.

Two small collage paintings from 1974 are key. Both reveal a right triangle trying to declare itself. That triangle, looking like a vestigial tail, later breaks out and appends itself to a rectangle in paintings from the Wooster series. In the later *Lo-Woosters* (so named because they ride close to the floor) the added triangle looks natural-born.

Growing up in Brooklyn, Stamm was attracted by trolley tracks, especially how the newer ones intersected those sunken in asphalt. His perception of these cross-tracks informs his *Dodger* paintings. (Is their primary are shape Ebbets Field?) On these canvases, drawn lines intersect with the actual boundaries of paint and frame.

This distilled survey forms an improbable autobiography—a

personal history pieced together of varieties of black paint. Stamm is a connoisseur of the stuff and has recently homebrewed a sheer acrylic. ("It's like Fredericks of Hollywood lingerie," he told me not long ago." You feel that you can lift it up with your fingers and tear through it to the surface.")

Geometric abstraction is not exactly in fashion these days. But standing in this handsome, punchy installation last week, I felt a vitality and sexiness absent in much more obviously glamorous work.