

TED STAMM

BY TIFFANY BELL

The exhibition of Ted Stamm's work at the Clocktower Includes work spanning approximately the last ten years. Per Jensen, who curated the show, appears to have selected work in order to suggest a progression toward emphases on specific concerns which have become integral to Stamm's later work. The show thus offers the viewer a chance to gain a more considered understanding of Stamm's painting than if presented with only a group of recent works.

The earliest painting in the show is *Her Neck is Important* of 1972, a large rectangular canvas with many colors apparently applied randomly in a gestural manner. These colors are partially painted over with black which loosely follows a grid pattern supplying an identifiable structure which works to contain the gestural aspect. Compared with Stamm's later work, *Her Neck is Important* is conventional in format and grid structure. Nonetheless, in retrospect, this painting suggests the artist's initial involvement with elements that have become more important.

The most obvious consistency in Stamm's work is his use of black. *Her Neck is Important*, in fact, is the only painting in the show (with the exception of a small painting in which silver metallic paint was used) that has color. Even here, though, black dominates. Perhaps more significantly, black is used to give the painting structure. It is a structure laid on top of the surface and one that depends on drawing. The use of black, the concern for an exposed, clearly defined structure, and the emphasis on drawing and frontality evident here become more apparent in the later work.

Wooster-4 (1974) suggests the direction Stamm's concerns took. It is made of two stretchers, a triangular one attached on the lower left side of a square. All the painting is done in a thick black paint covering both canvases except for two thin, uneven lines. One line runs from the upper-right corner of the square canvas to the right corner of the triangular one; the other starts at the upper-left corner of the square and goes to the point where it intersects the first line perpendicularly. Though the surface of the painting is textured and the lines not perfectly straight, one perceives primarily a move toward flatness,

frontality, and a unity defined by drawing. In this respect, *Wooster-4* recalls Robert Mangold's paintings. Like Mangold, Stamm allows the edges of the stretchers to act as lines relating to the drawn lines within the internal space of the painting. One is then inclined to read the surface as flat like the wall that supports it. This reference is reinforced by the drawing which connects the interior space of the painting to the exterior through line.

In making shaped paintings, Stamm abandons an organizational unity which is dependent upon a conventional format. One does not read these paintings in conventional terms but must rely on the structure defined by their shapes and drawing to make sense of them. By 1976, Stamm was using a more radical format in what he calls his *Dodger* paintings. These are again black and white (often the raw cotton duck canvas) but on an arched stretcher. The shapes of these paintings are not identical but change slightly in relation to the drawing and the forms on them. Basically, they are organized with a similar concern for flatness and frontality suggested through the use of drawing. These paintings, however, show a tendency to move away from that aspect that related them to Mangold's work in that the black as opposed to white becomes less a distinction between line and form as between shape and shape or image and ground. *CDGR-1* (1978-79), for example, is a heavy black cross on a "dodger" shape made of a single stretcher. The cross is most obviously a black image against a white ground. It is held to the surface by the flatness of the black and the manner in which the edges of the black form relate to the edges of the stretcher.

The shapes, flatness, and insistence on frontality in Stamm's work imply an intention to define objectness in painting. *LWX-1* and *LWX-2* (1979-80) most completely suggest this condition of Stamm's work. Both paintings are the same size and form: large (168" long) "wooster"-shaped stretchers with a large "V" on the side spanning the two stretchers. In *LWX-1*, the form is painted black against raw canvas, whereas in *LWX-2*, the "V" is the raw canvas with the rest of the painting having been covered in a flat, even black. The paintings hang on opposite sides of a room and significantly are low to the floor, aligning themselves with the floorline of the room. As such, the suggestion of the paintings' continuity with the exterior space made through the drawing is reinforced. Furthermore, it is again emphasized by the

opposition of the two paintings facing each other with the viewer in between. Adding to the perception of objectness, the height of the paintings removes the conventional inclination of reading a horizon crossing at eye level across the surface.

The emphasis on objectness particularly evident in *LWX-1* and *LWX-2* paradoxically becomes an emphasis on context. Though the paintings are self-referential in terms of their definitions as objects, the viewer's attention is directed to a consideration of the surrounding area. In this aspect, Stamm's work is somewhat reminiscent of that of Daniel Buren, for example. The work takes on an emblematic quality that signifies "Stamm's work" but directs attention to location.

Stamm's process for making his work is an investigative one. There is little sense that the work is declarative but rather that it offers a somewhat detached presentation of line, shape, black and white relating to each other and a place. To a large degree, the work suggests an independence; it is non-associative, non-conventional, and only in need of a place on the wall. This independence is important because it has everything to do with creating. On the other hand, the process comes close to allowing for an implication of negation. It is anticonventional; it implies the eradication of gesture and the working out of depth and ambiguity. At its worst, it produces emptiness; meaning becomes insignificant and one senses a kind of entrapment.

Stamm's paintings are passive; they do not elicit the negative implications suggested in consideration of the process. Nonetheless, one cannot help but wonder where his investigation will lead. In this sense, *BOR-1* (1980), the most recent painting exhibited, is interesting. Though the painting is certainly related to the other paintings in the show, it suggests another direction. It is a large rectangle with only the top corners unpainted. The black is expansive; it is less flat, has ambiguity, and is more imposing. It affects one's perception rather than balancing itself against it. It will be interesting to see how Stamm responds to this painting in his work to come. (The Clocktower, February 11)