

Exhibitions at National Academy of Sciences Washington, D.C. and The National Institutes of Health, 1987-1988

Patricia Mathews,
Department of Art History, Oberlin College

Method and meaning are closely integrated in the painting of Marvin Saltzman. To unravel one from the other demands a veritable act of excavation.

Saltzman's process contains both intrusion and occlusion. The artist begins of covering the surface of this canvas with a loud symphony of forms that he refers to as glyphs, which have the symbolic import of an untranslatable sign language. Certain repeated forms are his "fingerprints", his manner of intruding himself into the picture. His glyphs – in bright, almost garish colors – often have specific meaning: arrows stand for direction, rectangles represent planes, various linear elements signify lightning or mechanisms in space. Each series has its characteristic signs. He then partially buries these glyphs along with the expressive debris of his response to them. The resulting layers of paint are like drifts of color or light across the surface, alternately obscuring the glyphs and highlighting their silhouettes.

Herein may be read a psychological biography of the painter. The closure and veiling signify the degree of psychic repression that Saltzman is experiencing at the moment. The depth to which he buries the glyphs is thus directly related to the thickness of his own psychic protective shell at the moment of painting. This process of reverse archaeology, of embedding these glyphs within a matrix of veils and filters is thus a psychologically protective mechanism. His canvases – "written up", obscured and "rewritten" like palimpsests, those half-erased slates where the previous text is still partially visible – become palimpsests of his psyche. "One text is read through another", as critic Craig Owens defines allegorical structure. Its paradigm is the palimpsest 1. The very act of painting and the materiality of the veiling and/or revealing in that act conveys the dichotomy in the artist's psychological state vis-à-vis place, time and event.

This creative process is characteristic of all Saltzman's paintings in this exhibition, as is the other most important element of his work, its sense of place. All the works after his Paris Series, from 1980 to the present, are concerned with specific locales, except for the Space Shuttle Series of 1984-85, which deals with the concept of space. Places are generally seen on a grand scale, from high above. In these works, the disclosed glyphs become like parts of a map.

Another important aspect of Saltzman's creative process is his manner of working in a serial format. In a method similar to Monet's, Saltzman does not move sequentially from one painting to the next within a

series, but rather brings the group of paintings to the same state of completion, and finally to their “logical conclusion”, working on them all at the same time.

Because Saltzman’s life is so deeply etched in his works, it is instructive to examine the works chronologically, thus following the pattern of correspondence between his art and life.

Saltzman first experienced the revelation that, paradoxically, can occur through obscuring early in his career, around 1963. In need of canvas, he began to paint over a painting by his father (a psychologically charged venture) and gradually reached a point at which the painting took on a new life. His search for the significant fragment began; the artist embarked on a career painting out paintings that he has never really abandoned despite many transformations. Later, in Oregon, still struggling economically, he began to draw on old prints and paint out old paintings, calling them “Totems”.

After a varied career of paintings that included a dramatic response to President Kennedy’s death; an irreverently humorous Ronald Reagan intaglio series from 1966, now in the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., and a stint in California, in the late ‘60s Saltzman arrived at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he now paints and teaches. Here he began his most sedimented, deeply buried works, the White Paintings, like bleached, fragmented fossils. Saltzman now says they had little substance, although they appear formally impressive.

The important breakthrough in his art came years later, when he was awarded a grant to paint in Paris. Works completed just prior to his trip were “thin”, as Saltzman describes them, predictable, not “tough” paintings. With six months in Paris and time for serious painting, the artist should have been overjoyed. For the first time since 1967, he could “play” with paint. However, the Paris winter was hard and dreary. His Paris paintings express a sense of defensiveness and self-protection. The four paintings from this period in the exhibition are mute in terms of their archaeology. These are passive paintings, reveal little of the hidden information below. “I was still afraid”, he says.

Yet, despite its repressive character, this period proved to be of the greatest importance in releasing him to create; it is from this series that all the others evolve. “For the first time, I knew what I was doing, why I was painting”. During a two year period after his return Saltzman struggled to synthesize what he had learned in Paris. He repainted the “thin” paintings made before his trip and the richness of his experience in France infused vitality into these previously lifeless canvases. The compositions did not change; rather they were enriched and elaborated. The culmination of this period of search was his Mapscape Series: Landscapes, 1980 (#5 in this exhibition). Here he was able to pull together the important elements: a sense of place rather than a literal description; a viewpoint from above; and the use of recurring motifs. The structure of this particular work is formed by a crystalline intervention into a quiet landscape. He brings the painting to life by juxtaposing a quiet reference with lively foreground activity. Nevertheless, it is still more site-specific than the series that followed.

The elegant and lively Taride de Paris Series, 1980-82, represents the real breakthrough in its glyphic vocabulary, its networking of those glyphs across the surface, reminiscent of Miro’s Constellations from

the 1940s, and in its identification of motif with meaning. The title is that of the Paris street guide, signifying the visitor's lifeline to the city. One can actually "read" the borders of the arrondissement in yellow, and its cooler-toned neighboring districts. The imagery is that of street life, structure and circulation. All the Mapscapes use this language of glyph and network, and rely on motif shapes as well.

The L. A. Basin works from 1981-82 are recognizable for their oblong X-ed form, representing the topography of the Basin as one flies into Los Angeles. Saltzman's vision of this particular geography, so personal and yet universally recognizable, so witty and alive with twentieth century urban glut, recalls Gertrude Stein's observation upon the occasion of her first air flight:

... the twentieth century is a century which sees the earth as no-one has ever seen it, the earth has a splendor that it never has had ...2

It is this splendor and the love of a familiar place that one knows well, that Saltzman imparts to his Mapscape paintings.

The differing sense of place is clear when one compares the L. A. Basin Mapscapes with the North Carolina Mapscape Series (1982-83). Even from the air, Los Angeles leaves no room to breath. North Carolina allows that space, and the handling of space in this series is ultimately more complex.

The 1983 Mapscape Series: Carnivals, Fairs, and Assorted Amusement Zones, among the most primitive of Saltzman's works in terms of color and simplicity of forms, faithfully records its raucous subject. This series is followed by the more refined Space Shuttle Series, 1984-85, and the even more delicate Mapscape Series: Eastern Wetlands, 1985-86, that reflects a very subtly inflected landscape. The Barcelona Series of 1986 again uses sharp colors though not to the same degree as the Carnivals.

The work central to this exhibition is the Space Shuttle Series, 1984-85. These are among the most elegant and airy of Saltzman's paintings with their evocation of cosmic winds and solar light diffused through deep space. The series is particularly characterized by its exquisite color shifts: from silky gray to yellow, from pink to orange to lavender, from blue to green to yellow-green. Light seems to reach us from a great distance. Forms float through this cosmic vision, in a way reminiscent of certain pre-1920 Kandinsky paintings. Some forms, such as the snake-like glyph resembling a space arm, loom larger, and even block the light or redirect it at times, as though they were themselves on a planetary scale. There is a pervasive sense of slow movement through deep space, a space inhabited by the debris of the stars.

The joyous spirit of this series separates it from Saltzman's earlier work. The paintings are exuberant and playful, luxuriant and rich in color. There is a letting go, a release, although Saltzman's process remains the same. Planes, directional forms, circles, and edges are almost obscured as before, but, with vivid color heightening their traces, the glyphs become voluble.

The characters that inhabit Saltzman's paintings reappear again and again. From series to series, but particularly within each series, certain abstract personages or significant markings emerge and never entirely lose their identity. Their transformation proceeds in a variety of depictions of character.

The Eastern Wetlands Series, painted immediately after the Space Shuttle Series, is more serene, again expressing the dialectical shift in Saltzman's method. Water, sand, beach, and distance – a very different landscape for him – demand a more obscured and subdued presentation. In these paintings Saltzman describes the quality of late afternoon light on the Eastern Atlantic shore. Here the colors are quiet, almost like desert colors; the light comes from behind. At times lightning heightens the effect brilliantly. One looks down on these marshlands, with their inlets and tidal basins, and on the remarkable shifts of color resulting from light penetrating or being blocked by algae, sand, and water. In this lyrical series, Saltzman has turned from an abstract sense of space in the Space Shuttle paintings to almost literal geographical description. He has employed a light, airy, or in this case, watery sense of space first seen in the Space Shuttle Series. He continues to project such an atmospheric sense into the latest group in this show, Mapscape Series: Barcelona, 1986, although much modified in manner. Like the Space Shuttle Series, tonalities of individual canvases range from pink/lilac to blue/green, but are not as vibrant as in the earlier paintings. They are muted by the "brown" of the city of Barcelona itself. The background has a much stronger sense of palimpsest. Embedded like fossils in stone, only the imprints of original forms are seen. Large forms predominate. The density of the background gives the Barcelona paintings shallower depth than the Space Shuttle Series. The Barcelona pictures are fragmented memory structures, often containing references to Gaudi's fantastic forms and finials.

Saltzman's art has a charm that at first seems out of sync with our Postmodern world. Indeed, his work seems to slip into a kind of conscious time warp. Aware of the art of Gaudi and Miro, able to manipulate his deep knowledge of them, he channels his work into a stream navigated by no one but himself. Yet his personal connection to the contemporary world, his sense of its places and its spaces, its colors and its forms, its meanings and its reconciliations, its distractions and its disjunctions, permits his art to engage us, with a vocabulary that is mediated across the spaces of art and society. Ultimately, his art is in accord with a statement by Picasso that Saltzman paraphrases, "Painting is not experimental. It is a statement of what you know. It's how you see something, not how you do it, that makes art."

Patricia Mathews,
Department of Art History, Oberlin College

All Citations from the artist are from an interview with the author.

Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," pp. 204-5, in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis, N.Y., 1984 (originally published in *October*, Spring and Summer, 1980).

Cited by Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, New York, 1981, p. 56.