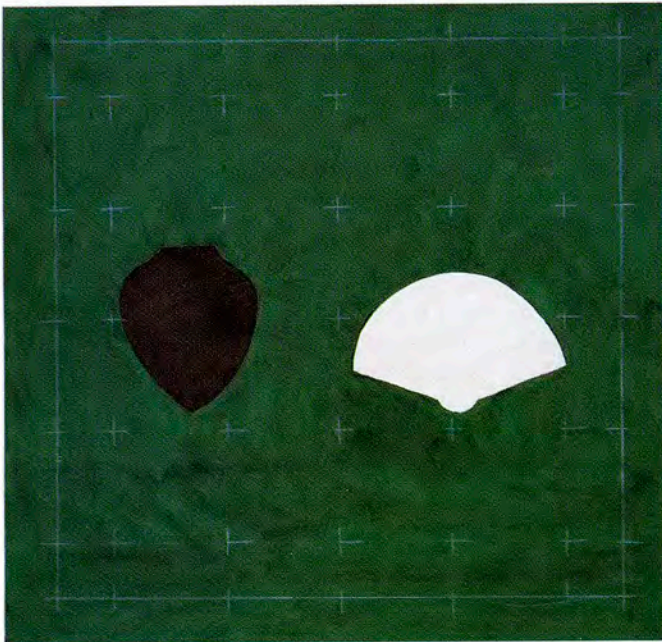


Language and Intuition

A 25-year survey reveals that, when her work gained attention as part of the "New Image Painting" in the late '70s, Denise Green was actually moving against the representational trend, toward abstraction.

BY TIFFANY BELL



Denise Green: *For All and None, 1978, oil and wax on canvas, 59 1/2 inches square. Collection Gerald and Eden Rafshoon, Washington, D.C.*

To Draw On, 1977, oil and wax on canvas, 60 inches square. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.



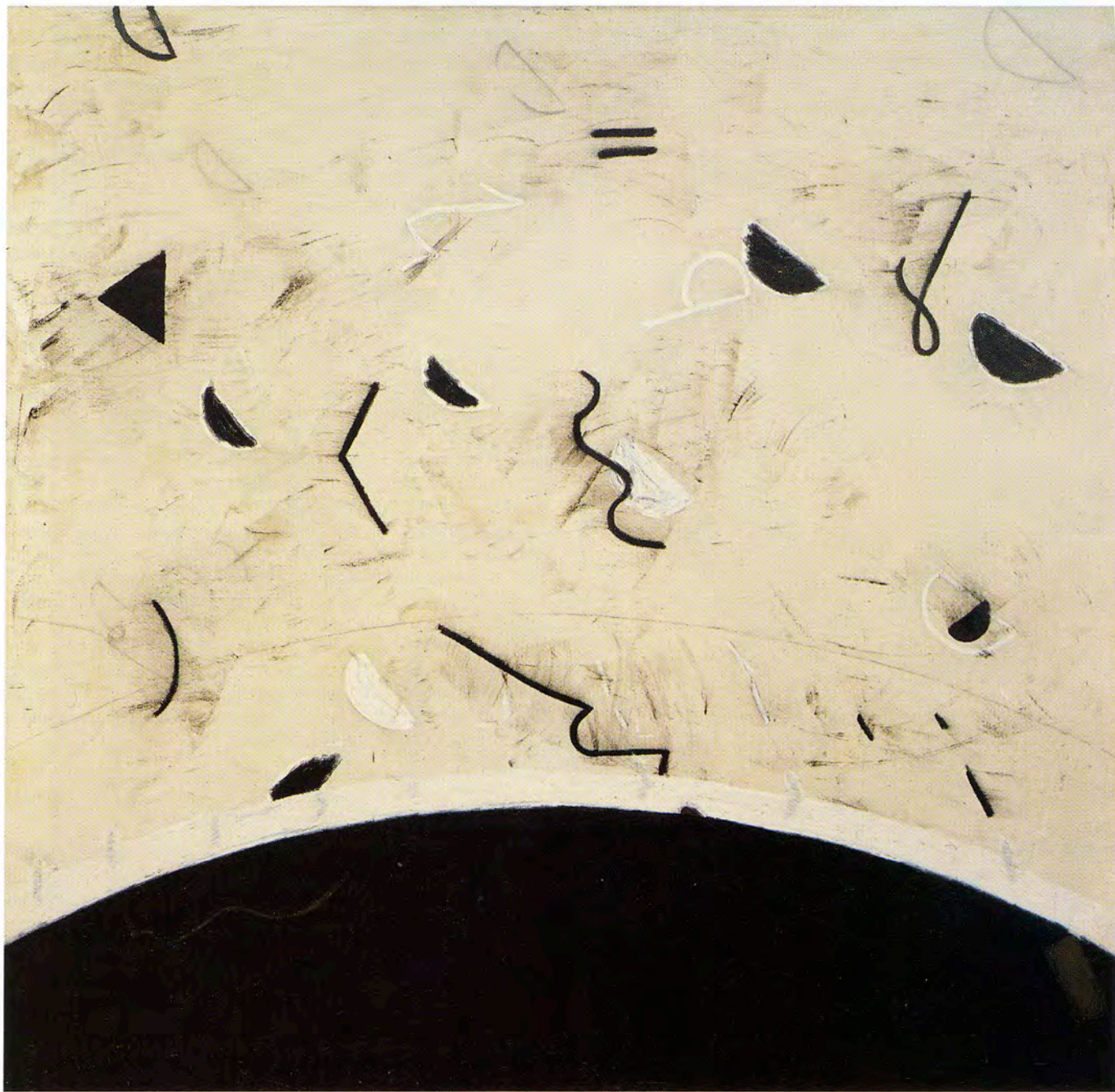
Denise Green's art first gained attention when it was included along with paintings by artists such as Jennifer Bartlett, Neil Jenney and Susan Rothenberg in the exhibition "New Image Painting" at the Whitney Museum in 1978. She exhibited her work regularly at New York galleries in the late 1970s through the '80s. In the past decade, however, most of her shows have been in Europe or her native country, Australia. Now a retrospective of paintings and works on paper, traveling in the U.S., offers a chance to see what Green has been doing and how her art looks as a whole.

The exhibition's first stop was at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City. It occupied four small rooms on the ground floor of the extensive exhibition complex and was a slightly edited version of the larger traveling show. Nonetheless, among the cacophony of installations and performance works and the barrage of wall-to-wall art throughout the rest of the building, these four rooms were a kind of oasis. The simple, sparsely hung galleries provided for the quiet, contemplative experience of looking at paintings. And despite the small number of works (18 oils and 8 works on paper) selected to represent close to 25 years of art-making, the show provided lots to see and think about.

The advantage of a retrospective is the opportunity it offers to consider the individual artist's development slightly removed from the influences of others. In the case of Green, for example, it becomes clear that despite her association with the return to image-making in the '70s, she was actually headed against that trend and toward abstraction. Her earlier paintings (not included in this show) were cityscapes that have affinities with works by Edward Hopper. The '70s oils are already somewhat abstract, involving the isolation of objects in an all-over monochromatic field of tertiary color. Seven of these "New Image" paintings form the core of her current show. Each is a square canvas with one or two silhouetted images—a chair, vessel, fan, bridge or a trap that looks something like a house—in a noncontextualized space. In several, the remnants of an overall grid are suggested by regularly spaced lines, points or crosses. In the '80s, the paintings became more abstract. Her configurations were less recognizable as images and more readily defined as geometric shapes, calligraphic markings or signs, all situated in nebulous parti-color fields. Recently she has reclaimed her earlier images, reintroducing generalized shapes of vessels, fans, houses and chairs together with geometric elements, all floating in softer fields of color that imply space.

Almost all the paintings in the exhibition are square, many are black and white, and most incorporate images in some way. Generally speaking, Green's paintings swing between two esthetic poles: one analytic, accentuating image, concept and structure; the other intuitive, stressing color, gesture and decoration. *Duane Triangle* (1988), a heavily textured, intensely colored green, red and black painting with boldly drawn, squiggled lines, was the exhibition's sole representative of the wildly decorative color and wholly nonreferential markings Green sometimes uses. This survey favors the analytic characteristics in its emphasis on the development of her image-making. The "New Image" paintings set the tone and present themselves as a kind of reservoir of motifs and concerns.

Like many of her contemporaries in the early '70s, Green was interested in theories of semiology and incorporated her thoughts about the visual language of signs in her work. The simplified, silhouetted shapes of her "New Image" paintings are centered on flat, square grounds; they recall the design of international



Summer Heat, 1981, oil and wax on canvas, 68½ by 70 inches. Courtesy Christine Abrahams Gallery, Melbourne.

symbols conveying information (presaging the more rigorous systems of Matt Mullican).

The meaning of Green's images and marks changes over time, but remains inherently ambiguous. In *Summer Heat* (1981), for example, she introduces calligraphic marks that resemble letters or mathematical symbols, thereby referring to written language. But though she proposes the idea of signs and language, she does not offer much possibility of specific interpretation. By altering the context of her symbols, she modifies their implications. Crosses that look like the intersections of a grid in a painting such as *For All and None* (1978) read as plus signs when isolated and floating on a field. Similarly, the fan shape that appears in the early paintings looks like a geometric element—a quadrant of a circle—when placed within a square and inclined on its side, as in *Duane Triangle*. Here, the calligraphic markings look more like random doodles—signs for intuitive gesture—than parts of words or mathematical equations. The more recent *Be Careful, She Dreams* (1997) combines several images and some abstract marks in an oneiric space. By tilting the house, elon-

gating the legs of the chair and multiplying the vessel (one red and two white ones), Green gives a sense of life to her symbols, as though they were characters in a strange animated film.

The implication that Green's signs have taken on personality is reinforced by the presence in the show of a series of works on paper titled *Rose Trellis 1 Through 36* (1992-98). These works, made of black ink, pastel crayons and watercolor, are installed as a grid. They are composed of many of Green's familiar motifs along with a few new ones—a mask, a canoe, stairways and a castle. Because the pen outline of many of the images has a cartoonish quality and the quasi-pictographic forms repeat and mutate throughout the series, the drawings suggest a sequential narrative with the images in some kind of dialogue with one another. These small pieces introduce a playful and humorous note to the exhibition.

An important subtext of the show is Green's preoccupation with the formal makeup of her paintings. In an embrace of modernist principles, she works to create a visual tension between the figure (or image) and the ground. In *For*

All or None, the dark and light shapes look as though they are cut out, but at the same time they appear to lie on top of the gridded surface. With the introduction of drawn pastel lines, multiple colors and interlocking geometric shapes, the compositions become more complex. These formal considerations are perhaps most elegantly resolved in a series of black-and-white paintings that Green made in the early 1990s. In *Taxes* (1993), a black square is centered within a square divided horizontally into two equal parts, the top black



Taxes, 1993, oil on canvas, 76 by 80 inches.
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.



Be Careful, She Dreams, 1997, acrylic on canvas, 72 inches square.
Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe.

and the bottom mostly white. Inside the black square is Green's familiar fan shape, apparently formed by rubbing out the color and then overlaying a wash of white. A ghostly echo of the fan reappears directly below the central square, and a drawn line meanders over the lower section, disappearing as it runs into the black square. The rectilinear, centered composition echoes Green's earlier paintings. Yet here the shapes are loosely defined, allowing edges to slip into fields, lines to become drips, drips to become lines, and surface areas to advance and recede. A yellowish wash activates an exchange between the empty canvas and white or black painted areas. What at first looks simple is a complicated interweaving of contrasting concepts: black to white, line to space, top to bottom, symbol to abstract shape and order to disorder.

In statements about her works, Green has underscored personal meaning, even in her relatively analytic and formal pieces. She has described her art as the visualization of her "state of mind" or as "a direct manifestation of an inner reality through the physicality of paint."¹

If the work's reflection of the artist's "inner reality" is hard for a viewer to judge, it is easier to understand how her experience has affected her painting. In Australia, as a child, Green was exposed to Aboriginal art, which she understood as a manifestation of a shared and culturally perceived spiritual reality. She left Australia at the age of 17 to study in Paris at the Ecole Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. Four years later she arrived in New York, where she did graduate work at Hunter College with Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell and Robert Morris. She has maintained a studio in New York since then but travels extensively to Europe, Asia and regularly to Australia.

She describes the isolation of her images in the early paintings as relating to her own aloneness after the breakup of a marriage and as a foreigner in New York. Thoughts of transition, security, growth, inwardness and outwardness pertain to her use of bridges, traps and vessels. The vessel and the fan refer to being a woman. In 1978 she stated:

The jug or vessel is an appropriate image because paintings are vessels which carry emotions and ideas. And in the past women throughout history have been identified with vessels in the sense that they too can carry things.²

The intense hues in many works were influenced by her visits to India and Bali, where she experienced color as "the most vital force in the environment." Similarly, her calligraphic marks often carry references to the hand and arm movements in the dancing of the Kathakali people in India. She interprets her 1990s black-and-white paintings as vehicles of belated mourning over the death of her father, even associating the drips with tears. Most recently, her compositions have been influenced by her observations of reflections of houses, windows, bridges and boats—upside down and mingling together—in the canals of Venice.³

These sources are interesting but not inherently available. Meaning in Green's work is open-ended, just as the sources are varied. It is shaped and suggested, but not dictated. What makes these paintings successful is the intelligent and proficient way Green has accomplished this merging of language and intuition. The paintings are beautifully conceived and executed, and they resonate with a generously open and accessible range of feelings and ideas. □

1. Denise Green, "Painting post-Greenberg," *Art Monthly Australia*, March 1996, p. 22; and Denise Green, "Rediscovering the Fan Shape," *Q: A Journal of Art*, Cornell University, Ithaca, April 1997, unpaginated.

2. Denise Green, interview with Linda Shearer in *Young American Artists*, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1978, pp. 28-29.

3. For a discussion of Green's influences and development, see Katrina Rumley, *Denise Green*, Sydney, An Art & Australia Book in association with G+B International, 1998.

After its presentation at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, "Denise Green: Resonating" traveled to the Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe [Aug. 28-Oct. 30]. It will appear at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum, New London, Conn. [Jan. 7-Mar. 16, 2000]. The exhibition was organized by Marilyn Zeitlin, director of the Arizona State University Art Museum, and is accompanied by a 60-page monograph with an essay by Katrina Rumley. A second traveling retrospective will open in Australia in January 2000, and a European version of that show is in the planning stages. A solo exhibition of Green's work is currently on view at Galerie Asbæk, Copenhagen [Oct. 4-Nov. 6].

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Duane Triangle, 1988, oil and paintstick on canvas, 72 inches square. Courtesy Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

Left to right, #24, #12 and #31 from the "Rose Trellis" series, 1992-98, watercolor, ink and pastel on paper, each 11 by 9 inches. Courtesy (respectively) Raab Galerie, Berlin; Landfall Press, Inc., Chicago; Galerie Asbæk, Copenhagen.

