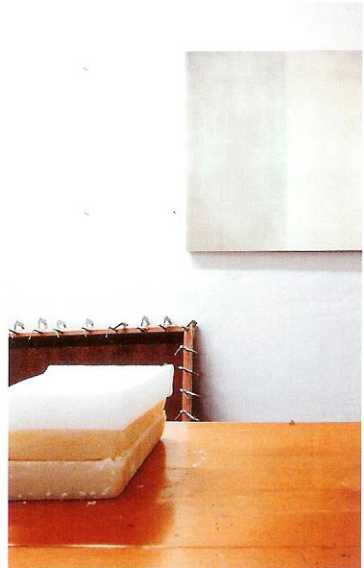


THE MONOCHROME PAINTING IS ARGUABLY THE MOST EXEMPLARY ICON OF modernist art and also its most mysterious. Identified with artists such as Kasimir Malevich, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Lucio Fontana, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Rauschenberg and Brice Marden, it can be defined as a rectangle of a single, unmodulated color hung on a wall and looked at with more or less reverence. In his well-presented, revisionist essay, "Seeking the Primal Through Paint, The Monochrome Icon," critic Thomas McEvilley asks why. He enumerates its lacks: no skills required such as draughtsman-ship; color handling and harmonies are missing; no subject matter, drama or narrative; no painterly touch, the paint could be applied with a roller, a spray gun or the canvas could be left in its natural state. He ends with the dismissive observation that you might as well just look at the wall. Yet this series of negations has been the embodiment, McEvilley states, of the deepest meaning of Western modernist art, "its highest spiritual aspirations, its dream of a utopian future, its madness, its folly."



What is often overlooked in this assessment of monochrome painting, however, is its identity as a discrete object. From the beginning, monochrome – also called “anionic,” “pure,” “radical” or “fundamental” at various points in its history – was criticized as a concept more than as a specific work of art. But monochrome painting, like other kinds of painting, has a range and is distinctive, varying greatly in its physicality as well as in its intent, depending upon the practitioner; it cannot be regarded or judged indiscriminately. A roomful of red paintings will not be exactly alike, despite philosopher Arthur Danto’s contention in the “Transfiguration of the Commonplace,” not because they differ in title and purpose but more simply because they don’t look alike. Beyond the idea, monochrome paintings are constituted differently and while they can be sprayed or rolled on, as McEvilley noted, they can also be meticulously or wildly executed, stroke by stroke. The monochromes of Yves Klein, Ryman or any of the artists previously mentioned, are as easily distinguishable as a de Kooning from a Pollock, say, or a Cecily Brown from a Lucien Freud for that matter, because as paintings, they all have the same attributes: color, texture, touch, interior scale, exterior measure, weight, space, light and consequently, they have an image, one that might be purely retinal or might include narrative.

In fact, they have everything that many say they lack. Perhaps you have to love them more to look attentively and see the differences for while they may be modernism's exemplary icon, paintings stripped to their essentials, to their phenomenal and noumenal core, they have also been the paintings that viewers love to hate, that like the Emperor's new clothes, traffic deliberately in deception. McEvilley concludes with the thought that while in California young artists may still make monochrome with its notions of spirituality, sublimity and existential void, in Europe and New York it has become revised by irony, its metaphysical seriousness disrupted, bankrupted and now merely a "banner on the grave of the mad ambition of Modernist abstraction."

Yet there are artists, young and otherwise, who are still deeply invested in notions of monochrome un-revised by irony; they can still be found in Europe and in the United States, in New York as well as California or New Mexico, say. Phil Binaco, who was raised on the East Coast but has lived in Santa Fe for many years, is one of them, an artist who steadfastly believes that the monochrome project is ongoing, viable, that it can be redefined and extended. Binaco's versions of monochrome are variously sized, dense, polished squares made from several kinds of wax which are stabilized by acrylic resin and applied in layers to Masonite® panels.

Binaco's paintings are both pragmatic and transcendent, solid and immaterial, their objectness evident but provisional, like matter melting into spirit, body into soul and back again. The richly worked, translucent surface of his paintings – for this exhibition all grey on white or white on white – is supported by a framework which projects it forward from the wall an inch or so, underscoring its material presence while the delicate, elusive image – there is one but it may take time to appear – shifts in collusion with the light. Binaco uses a stylus to inscribe his characteristic marks – tiny, flickered dots or quick dashes in an overall pattern – into the ground; he then dips a heated wire brush into pigment and fills the finely etched grooves, a practice and pattern that resembles a kind of pointillism, a schematic impressionistic vision linked to the sense of endless space in the West, to its hard cascades of light, to distant views and silences. He says that light hits the pigment in his incisions and bounces back; “the pigment casts a shadow so what you see is a shadow... it’s about light, not line.” It is also about the ritual of repetition, of fastidious mark-making, impelled by some universal sense of obsessive, ordained organization. As a monochromatist, Binaco’s works are of a single color but that color changes as the light changes. Under certain conditions, his white, for example, appears to range from a warm ivory sheen to a cool yellow to a pale phosphorescent green while the un-etched bands

or smaller squares that variously demarcate the field can disappear altogether. What seems to be an immaculate and luminous surface is actually hundreds of little marks, structuring the enveloping aura at the same time it breaks it up. Binaco's constructs function as a diagram of infinite flow and energy and picture the drift and creak of the universe: a cosmic mirroring. Peering into them, their constellated surfaces might yield their ambiguous depths, their indeterminate spatiality – or they might not – depending upon external circumstances. As the different aspects of Binaco's monochromes are activated by the different qualities of light they encounter, they are constantly re-charged, like water, sky, weather. Agnes Martin, with whom Binaco frequently visits and shares an ongoing dialogue, once said that the artist must, in the "midst of reality and responding with joy... pursue the truth relentlessly. The manipulation of materials in the art work is a result of this state of mind." Certainly Binaco works from this awareness, convinced that sincere abstraction with its ontological themes (as opposed to ironic abstraction) continues to offer exhilarating possibilities.

– *Lilly Wei*

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