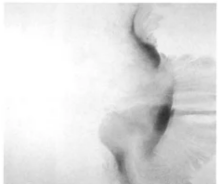
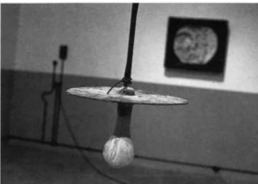


Michael David

By Donald Kuspit



Michael David, *Leap into the Void (for Klein)*, 1999. Encaustic on canvas, 68 1/2 x 7 1/2".



Jeanne Silverthorne, *The Studio Stripped Bare, Again*, 1999. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris.

yard. Hence the double entendre of the series' title: Are we looking for something that, although out there, remains at an unreachable distance, or are we just seeing the nothing that's right there in front of our eyes?

Barth is scarcely the first to assert what might be called photography's "absence as presence," and the window as a metaphor for human vision is so well-worn it runs the risk of cliché. But Barth never crosses that line. By making the window an active (often dominant) element, Barth foregrounds the act of perception, of framing and selection. But the blunt matter-of-factness of her photographs keeps them from feeling physical objects, not just metaphorical statements.)

The literateness of Barth's images—along with their banal subject matter and social logic—align "nowhere near" with Conceptual projects like Ed Ruscha's *Twentynine Gasoline Stations*. However, Barth departs decisively from Ruscha's snapshot aesthetic. Although dispassionate, her photographs are also slow and deliberate. Barth's work is less a retrenchment from the critical terrain staked out by Conceptualism than an attempt to augment it with what Conceptual art traditionally denies, namely, aesthetics. Barth's work is indeed beautiful, but her ultimate concern is less the power of aesthetics to seduce than its capacity to generate a specific form of knowledge (one that is neither empirical nor conceptual) in this particular case, the knowledge of what it might be like to momentarily inhabit the gap between an object's existence and our ability to pin it down.

—Margaret Sandell

MICHAEL DAVID KNOEDLER & COMPANY

Michael David's most recent abstract encaustic paintings are eloquently deceptive: What looks at first like wispy atmosphere—elusive surges of color against an amorphous ground—is on closer inspection revealed to be a tactile, heavily built-up surface. For over twenty years, David has been working in this encaustic technique, which involves combining dry pigments with melted wax and damar varnish, and he takes the process quite seriously: *Pump* (all works 1999) uses some sixty pounds of molten cadmium-red wax—a magma the artist pours on the canvas in a gesture evoking Jackson Pollock's process. But where the traces of Pollock's pourings are eminently visible, those of David's performance are private—gone underground, as it were, because the paint has been compacted and smoothed over. This creates a sense of pent-up pressure in the work, as if, under the crust of beautiful color, the paintings might boil over at any moment.

What makes David's canvases seductive is their latent (rather than blatant) emotivity. The marvelous *Self-Portrait* is a case in point: An erotic current of red, with a kind of linear spine, rises out of nowhere, holding its own against the luminous emptiness. This apparition becomes an existential presence, only to fall back again into meaningless materiality. Because David allows no resolution to what promises to be a figurative element (recalling one of Clyfford Still's pushed-to-the-edge "figures"), he creates an effect of dissolution. Bearing vestiges of the human body, this hauntingly indefinite form can be read as a kind of enigmatic memento mori; David seems to be exploring the depressive aspects of process painting, along with its aggressive tendencies.

With his swirls of color standing in for the human figure, David presents the body's dissolution in a "gesture" of transcendence. *Leap Into the Void (for Klein)* is an homage to the photographs documenting Yves Klein's staged flying leap, which articulated the irony of attempting transcendence in modern dress. David, however, gives greater prominence to the void than to the figure in blue (Klein's signature color) who seems to be on the verge of disappearing into it. And in paintings like *Le Violon d'Ingres (for Man Ray)* and *Amaryllis (for Georgia O'Keefe)*, David seems to bring this quest for the sublime into the realm of erotic desire. By engaging photography and figuration in these works, he suggests that abstract painting can deliver on something that those media can only propose: the sense of transcendence attainable in the erotic context. Keeping faith with abstract painting, David keeps alive the idea of transcendence, and with it the sacredness of eros.

—Donald Kuspit

JEANNE SILVERTHORNE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART AT PHILIP MORRIS

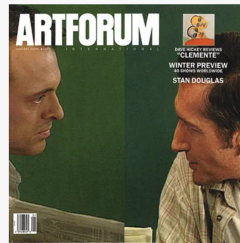
The Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris is a peculiar exhibition site, challenging both physically and socially. It begins with an outside atrium, the Sculpture Court, one of those lofty office-lobby areas—glass-walled, granite-floored,

green-tinted—that have grown up in response to zoning laws rewarding corporations that devote some of their acreage to public use. Like many such rooms, this one is scattered with tables where you can bring your lunch. In one corner is a glass door leading to a small gallery. Artists working here may use both spaces, but in either case they can expect that a lot of their viewers will be here not to visit an art destination but to eat a sandwich, read the paper, or just kill time.

The large outer hall might seem to call for large space-filling work, but Jeanne Silverthorne took the opposite route: Her installation here, titled *The Studio Stripped Bare, Again*, was about as attenuated as it could be, for it took the form of what seemed to be electrical cables, hanging in loops from the forty-two-foot ceiling and strung in thin ranks along the walls, where they hooked up in places with junction boxes and other fittings. In a couple of spots the suspended cords came to an end in a light fixture without a bulb and with a dangling pull-chain too high for anyone to reach. And even if you could, the cables carried no juice: These were casts of wiring and electrical gear, not the real thing. In fact, since they were cast in rubber, an insulator, the wires weren't even conductive: A tangle of flow and power, as converted into a sign of stymied blockage.

This could have been what moved one viewer of the show to write in the visitor's book: "This all looks like an abortion clinic!" It is a shocking, hostile remark, but it does have a certain horrid insight: Silverthorne's work is hyperconscious to the body. The soft rubber is fleshy in consistency, and the wires and junction boxes stand in for circulatory systems and organic nodes and pumps, she herself has written of the artist's studios, the subject of much of her artmaking as well as its site: "We are the space. The wall of the studio becomes covered with our skin. Its guts are our entrails, dangling wires our ganglia, plumbing is arteries."

The visitor's book writer may have been cued to this slippage among body, space, and art object by the continuation of the installation in the small gallery, which included, along with more cooling and hanging cords (some of them suspending a dead-looking rubber lightbulb), three sawy wall-bored painting-like objects that turned out to be rubber casts of skin pores and sweat (greatly enlarged) set in black casts of ornate salon-style frames. Also here were works reflecting another aspect of Silverthorne's art: on a shelf,



Cover: Stan Douglas, *Win, Place or Show (detail)*, 1998, still from a two-channel video projection with a four-channel sound track; 2,423 variations, averaging 6 minutes each. Inset: Francesco Clemente, *She and She (detail)*, 1982, pastel on paper, 24 x 18".

JANUARY 2000

VOL. 38, NO. 5

ARCHIVE

SHARE

Michael David's most recent abstract encaustic paintings are eloquently deceptive: What looks at first like wispy atmosphere—elusive surges of color against an amorphous ground—is on closer inspection revealed to be a tactile, heavily built-up surface. For over twenty years, David has been working in this encaustic technique, which involves combining dry pigments with melted wax and damar varnish, and he takes the process quite seriously: *Pump* (all works 1999) uses some sixty pounds of molten cadmium-red wax—a magma the artist pours on the canvas in a gesture evoking Jackson Pollock's process. But where the traces of Pollock's pourings are eminently visible, those of David's performance are private—gone underground, as it were, because the paint has been compacted and smoothed over. This creates a sense of pent-up pressure in the work, as if, under the crust of beautiful color, the paintings might boil over at any moment.

What makes David's canvases seductive is their latent (rather than blatant) emotivity. The marvelous *Self-Portrait* is a case in point: An erotic current of red, with a kind of linear spine, rises out of nowhere, holding its own against the luminous emptiness. This apparition becomes an existential presence, only to fall back again into meaningless materiality. Because David allows no resolution to what promises to be a figurative element (recalling one of Clyfford Still's pushed-to-the-edge "figures"), he creates an effect of dissolution. Bearing vestiges of the human body, this hauntingly indefinite form can be read as a kind of enigmatic memento mori; David seems to be exploring the depressive aspects of process painting, along with its aggressive tendencies.

With his swirls of color standing in for the human figure, David presents the body's dissolution in a "gesture" of transcendence. *Leap Into the Void (for Klein)* is an homage to the photographs documenting Yves Klein's staged flying leap, which articulated the irony of attempting transcendence in modern dress. David, however, gives greater prominence to the void than to the figure in blue (Klein's signature color) who seems to be on the verge of disappearing into it. And in paintings like *Le Violon d'Ingres (for Man Ray)* and *Amaryllis (for Georgia O'Keefe)*, David seems to bring this quest for the sublime into the realm of erotic desire. By engaging photography and figuration in these works, he suggests that abstract painting can deliver on something that those media can only propose: the sense of transcendence attainable in the erotic context. Keeping faith with abstract painting, David keeps alive the idea of transcendence, and with it the sacredness of eros.

—Donald Kuspit