

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

SATURDAY, JANUARY 24, 2009

By Kenneth Baker

David Simpson's 1970s abstractions still radical



"Red Square" (1974), acrylic on canvas by David Simpson.

Photo courtesy of Modernism Inc., San Francisco

Simpson's uncompromising abstractions may look almost as radical today as when he made them.

Consider "Red Square" (1974). A canvas a little more than 6 1/2 feet square, it presents a ground plane of evenly matte, deep red. Flat rectangles varying in color, dimensions and finish intrude into this square field from its edges, some of the smallest ones looking a little like Post-it notes. At their busiest, they even suggest marginalia commenting on the central field.

At first, a viewer might wonder whether some calculus intended to balance the intensities, hues and surface areas of various colors governs what Simpson made. But the more paintings in this line one looks at, the more intuitively ordered, and no less right for it, they seem.

Simpson surely knew that the mind would read all the lesser squares as equivalent - the smaller ones farther away, the larger ones closer - while the eye would register the plurality of hues as irreducible. Elsewhere in the paintings, rectangles at the

Simpson's angles of vision: Modernism gallery offers a thrilling selection of works that represent a very different facet of Bay Area sensibility: abstract paintings from the '70s and '80s by David Simpson.

While most people have grown comfortable with the sort of Bay Area Figuration revisited at Berggruen,

margins pose similar temptations to see them as surrogates for one another.

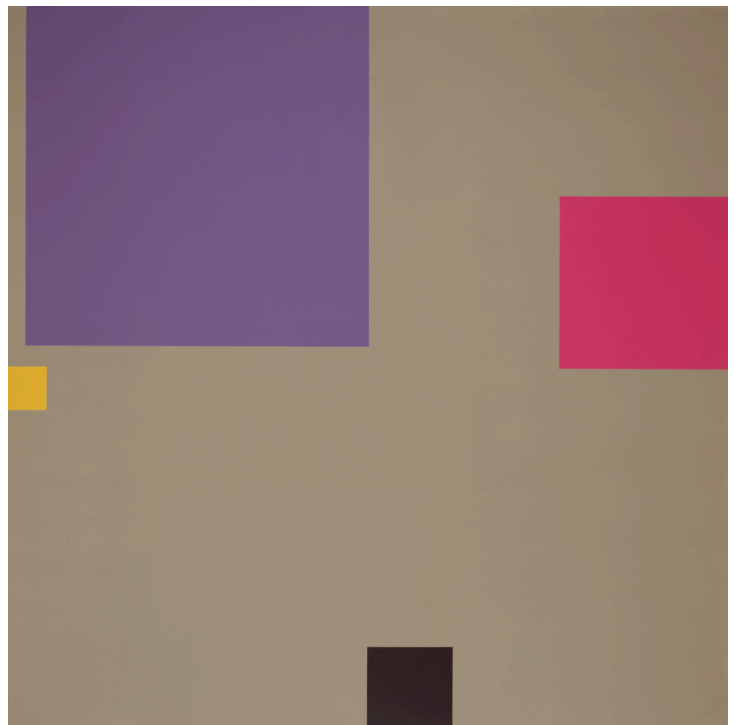
These inevitable inconsistencies in response engage imagination with the seemingly uninflected ground plane, warping and stretching it at an almost metaphysical level. Illusionism never really comes to life, but sensations of having one's attention nudged, tugged or ricocheted around the painting's surface certainly do.

The title "Red Square" transmits an echo of Kazimir Malevich's famous "Red Square" (1915) down a long train of Constructivist descendants, all the way through evocations of Barnett Newman (1905-1970) and Ellsworth Kelly. In the 1970s, Simpson's painting would have taken its place more readily in the narrower context of color-field abstraction, a tendency more associated with New York than the Bay Area.

How lucid and soulful Simpson's big paintings of the period look today. They may appear to present themselves wholly at a glance, because they conceal nothing, but it takes time to size up how any one of these pictures operates in terms of color, composition or visual poetics.

It may take a while also to realize how much objectivity they have in common with the recent works on paper by Simpson at Modernism. Intimations of landscape occur in these pieces, which even suggest miniature horizontal scrolls at

points. But with close attention, a viewer can sense the accidental nature of such effects and the artist's indifference to them as anything but the result of a process. His use of interference pigments, which respond to light in ways he cannot control, underlines the point. He invites us to enjoy the materials of illusionism and its invitation of fantasy, without forgetting ourselves.



"Quatro Caminos" (1980), acrylic on canvas by David Simpson.

Photo courtesy of Modernism Inc., San Francisco

David Simpson: Paintings and Works on Paper. Through March 7. Modernism, 685 Market St., San Francisco. (415) 541-0461, www.modernisminc.com.

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This article appeared on page E - 3 of the San Francisco Chronicle