

ONCE UPON A TIME, THE SIGHT OF A PAINTING THAT WAS RESTRICTED TO THE FAMILIAR SHAPES OF GEOMETRY—ARCS AND STRAIGHT LINES, TRIANGLES AND CIRCLES, PARALLELS AND PERPENDICULARS—IMMEDIATELY DECLARED AN ALLEGIANCE TO THE DOMAIN OF REASON AND PERFECT ORDER, AN IDEAL BLUEPRINT FOR PLACING THE VIEWER ON THE THRESHOLD OF A NEWLY-MINTED UTOPIA THAT WOULD FIRMLY SHUT ITS DOORS ON THE HISTORICAL PAST. HOW THINGS HAVE CHANGED! NOW, AS OUR CENTURY DRAWS TO A CLOSE, WE REALIZE THAT ONE OF ITS UNIQUE INVENTIONS—A STRANGE KIND OF EASEL PAINTING THAT BANS THE SEEN, TERRESTRIAL WORLD IN FAVOR OF A BOUNDLESS, CELESTIAL ONE CONSTRUCTED BY RULER AND COMPASS—WAS BY NO MEANS SO SINGLE-MINDED IN ITS MESSAGE. THE LANGUAGE OF GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION, IT TURNS OUT, WAS ACTUALLY CAPABLE OF COVERING THE WIDEST RANGE OF EMOTIONS AND VISUAL INTRICACIES, AS WELL AS OFFERING ALLUSIONS TO THINGS WAY BEYOND THE EDGES OF THE CANVAS, WHETHER THE CITY OUTSIDE THE ARTIST'S IVORY TOWER, A RESOUNDING COSMOS WHOSE PURE ETHER COULD PERMIT BOTH AIRPLANES AND TRANSCENDENTAL SPIRITS TO NAVIGATE, OR OF ALL UNLIKELY THINGS, EVEN EARLIER, OLD-FASHIONED ART.

WHAT FIRST LOOKED LIKE LOGIC, LAW, AND ORDER COULD OFTEN CONCEAL, AS IN THE CASES OF MONDRIAN AND MALEVICH, ELABORATELY OCCULT SCENARIOS THAT WOULD MAKE ANY RATIONAL HUMAN BEING CRINGE WITH DISBELIEF. WHAT FIRST WAS CONSIDERED THE PRODUCT OF A MIND AS UTILITARIAN AS AN ENGINEER'S—INSISTENTLY REGIMENTED, NO-FRILLS PATTERNS—OCCASIONALLY ENDED UP, AS IN THE CASE OF STELLA'S BLACK PAINTINGS, WITH DISTURBING RESONANCES THAT COULD LEAD IN THE DIRECTIONS OF OVERPOWERING GLOOM OR FIERCE OBSESSION. WHAT FIRST MIGHT HAVE BEEN THOUGHT OF AS CEREBRAL EXERCISES IN SPATIAL COMMENSURATION, AS IN THE CASE OF DANIEL BUREN'S ARMIES OF PARALLEL STRIPES INVADING BOTH GALLERY ENCLOSURE AND THE GREAT OUTDOORS, COULD BECOME AN ELEGANT, DECORATIVE SIGNATURE STYLE LIKE THE PATTERNS OF WALLPAPER, AWNINGS, OR MARBLE. WHAT FIRST APPEARED TO BE THE MOST COLD-BLOODED REINCARNATION OF THE GROWINGLY VENERABLE LANGUAGE OF GEOMETRY COULD ALSO REVEAL, AS IN THE CASE OF SUCH NEO-GEO PAINTERS AS PHILIP TAAFFE, AN ALMOST SENTIMENTAL NOSTALGIA FOR A LONG-LOST MODERNIST WORLD THAT COULD BE AS LAYERED AND RETROSPECTIVE AS A 19TH-CENTURY ACADEMIC PAINTER'S QUOTATIONS FROM RAPHAEL AND ANTIQUITY.

SUCH MUSINGS MAY HELP US TO GET A FOOTHOLD ON RICHMOND BURTON'S PAINTINGS. AT FIRST GLANCE, THEY MAY LOOK LIKE MONOTONOUSLY REPETITIVE FACADES MADE OF THE COLDEST PICTORIAL ARMOR, OBLIGING US TO FEEL THAT THE POWER OF PAINTING TO SEDUCE THE SENSES, TO WAFT THE IMAGINATION OR TO STIR THE EMOTION HAS BEEN BANISHED AT THE STUDIO DOOR. WITHIN BURTON'S REALM, VOWS APPEAR TO HAVE BEEN TAKEN TO A PERSONAL RELIGION IN WHICH THE MOST ELEMENTAL GEOMETRIC MODULE—A STRIPE, AN ARC, A DIAMOND—BECOMES THE OBJECT OF INTENSE VENERATION AND KALEIDOSCOPIIC SCRUTINY, A ROCKBOTTOM TRUTH TO BE REPEATED WITH THE MOST NUANCED VARIATIONS IN THE WAY THAT A DEVOUT MONK MIGHT PERFORM A SERIES OF DAILY RITUAL PRAYERS. THE SKELETAL CLARITY OF THESE PAINTINGS INSTANTLY CONJURES UP THE DOMAIN OF REASON AND PRECI-

SION, A RESPONSE QUICKLY CONFIRMED WHEN WE LEARN THAT BURTON HAD WORKED FOR TWO YEARS AS AN ARCHITECTURAL DRAFTSMAN IN I. M. PEI'S OFFICE. EVEN MORE RELEVANTLY HE HAD MADE MANY DRAWINGS FOR THE DIAMOND-PATTERNED, TRIANGULAR GLASS FACADES OF THE LOUVRE PYRAMID, A DESIGN STARTLINGLY REBORN IN A SERIES OF LARGE CANVASES, STRETCHING TO A WIDTH OF 10 FEET, THAT DISCARD PEI'S ARCHITECTURE AND PRESERVE ONLY AN IMMENSE FRAGMENT OF A DECORATIVE SYSTEM THAT SEEMS TO EXTEND FOREVER. BUT THIS ABSOLUTE TYRANNY OF PATTERN SOON DISCLOSES UNEXPECTED QUIRKS THAT UNDERMINE THE INSTANTLY PERCEIVED ORDER. FOR EXAMPLE, THE VERTICAL DIVISIONS THAT SHARPLY CLEAVE THESE CRYSTALLINE SPACES AT THE LEFT AND RIGHT EDGES AND AT THE CENTER OF WHAT SURPRISINGLY TURNS OUT TO BE A DIPTYCH, OCCUR NOT ON, BUT OFF, THE CENTRAL AXIS OF THE DIAMOND PATTERN ITSELF. THE RESULT IS A DOUBLE VISUAL AND EMOTIONAL SYSTEM THAT IS SUBTLY OUT OF JOINT WITH ITSELF, AS IF BARNETT NEWMAN HAD USED HIS HEROIC VERTICAL ZIPS TO FRACTURE THE INFINITE SPACES OF A DECORATIVE MOSAIC WALL.



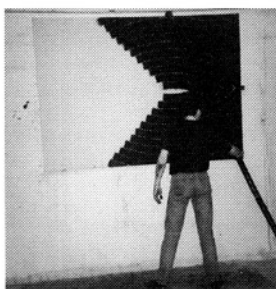
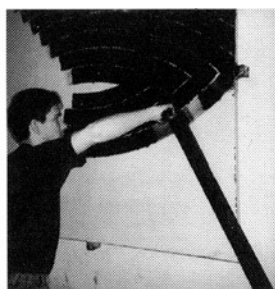
THROUGHOUT BURTON'S WORK, THIS OVERT CLARITY IS COVERTLY UNDONE, GIVING BITE AND EDGE TO WHAT DECEPTIVELY APPEARS AS AN UNSHAKABLY HERALDIC ORDER. IN HIS VERTICAL SKYSCRAPER SPACES, WITH THEIR TOWERING YELLOW-AND-BLACK FACADES, SUCH IDEAL ABSTRACT CITIES COLLAPSE UNDER THE PRESSURE OF AN ABUNDANCE OF VISUAL PARADOXES, IN WHICH CONCAVE AND CONVEX COLLIDE. MOREOVER THE CROPPED RIGHT AND LEFT EDGES, SURPRISINGLY OUT OF KILT WITH THE APPARENT SYMMETRY, SEEM TO PROVIDE, IF MERGED IN THE MIND'S EYE, A CONTINUOUS PATTERN, MUCH LIKE THE CEREBRAL FUSION JASPER JOHNS HAS BEEN EXPLORING IN EXTENDED PATTERNS WHOSE LEFT EDGE SEEMS TO PICK UP WHERE THE RIGHT EDGE LEAVES OFF, BRINGING THE PAINTED FIELD BACK ON ITSELF, AS IF ON A CIRCULAR ROLL. AND IN BURTON'S "FISSURED SPACES," AS HE CATEGORIZES A CHEVRON PATTERN OF SWORDPOINT ARCHES, THIS OSTENSIBLY ARCHITECTURAL CLARITY IMMEDIATELY DISSOLVES INTO A DIZZYING VARIETY OF PARTIAL READINGS. HIS JUGGLING OF ILLUSIONS MAKES V-SHAPED DEPTHS ABRUPTLY SHIFT DIRECTIONS, TURNS FLAT SLICES OF SPACE INTO ESCALATORS MOVING BOTH UP AND DOWN, TRANSFORMS THE SIMPLEST MOTIF OF BLACK AND YELLOW STRIPES INTO A DISQUIETING BUT PERFECT GRIDLOCK OF PERSPECTIVAL CONTRADICTIONS.



IN ACCORD WITH THE PULSE OF LATE 20TH-CENTURY ART, THESE REINCARNATIONS OF THE SPATIAL YES AND NO OF EARLIER GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION HAVE A RETROSPECTIVE, HISTORICIZING CHARACTER, ELABORATE GLOSSES ON THE MAJOR TEXTS OF WHAT HAS NOW BECOME THE VENERABLE PAST OF ABSTRACT ART. BURTON, IN FACT, IS DEMONIC AND INDEFATIGABLE IN HIS SCRUTINY OF THE GROWINGLY DISTANT TRADITION OF HIS ANCESTORS; AND HIS KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR WORK IN TERMS OF BOTH LOOKING AND RECREATING IS MIND-BOGGLING. LIKE A MEDIEVAL MONK IN A SCRIPTORIUM, HE HAS PAINSTAKINGLY COPIED *IN SITU* THESE HALLOWED ACHIEVEMENTS. FOR INSTANCE, IN THE SPRING OF 1989, HE TRAVELED TO AMSTERDAM TO SEE THE MALEVICH RETROSPECTIVE AT THE STEDELIJK MUSEUM AND, IN IMMACULATE NOTEBOOKS, REPLICATED ONE BY ONE EVERY WORK IN THE SHOW, THEREBY CREATING A NEW KIND OF PERSONAL EXHIBITION CATALOGUE IN WHICH ALL THE REPRODUCTIONS ARE HANDMADE BY THE VIEWER. MOREOVER, HIS INTEREST IN WORSHIPPING OLD ART WITH FAITHFUL COPIES EXTENDS BEYOND THE DOMAIN OF PURE ABSTRACTION. LONG STINTS IN THE MUSÉE PICASSO IN PARIS PRODUCED DRAWN REPLICAS OF A WIDE RANGE OF THE MASTER'S WORK IN BOTH TWO AND THREE DIMENSIONS; AND SESSIONS AT THE LOUVRE PROMPTED REPLICAS NOT ONLY OF CLASSICS BY CARAVAGGIO, DAVID, AND GÉRICAUT BUT, MORE TO THE ABSTRACT POINT OF HIS OWN ART, EXACT COPIES OF THE GEOMETRIC PATTERNS PRESERVED ON ROMAN MOSAIC FLOORS. AND IN THE WINTER OF 1989, FOR THE DURATION OF THE PICASSO-BRAQUE SHOW AT MOMA, HE HAS BEEN TRYING TO RECORD AS MANY HARD-TO-SEE WORKS FROM REMOTE COLLECTIONS AS POSSIBLE, IN ADDITION TO MAKING PLANS TO GO TO BASEL FOR THE CÉZANNE BATHERS SHOW, WHERE HE MIGHT IMMERSE HIMSELF IN ANOTHER KIND OF OBSSIVE THEME AND VARIATIONS.

SUCH METICULOUS, SOME WOULD SAY SERVILE, COPYING MAY APPEAR TO BE ONLY AN ODD MUTATION OF A ONCE-FAMILIAR TRADITION OF ARTISTS BEING EDUCATED BY COPYING THE OLD MASTERS IN THE MUSEUMS; YET AS PRACTICED BY BURTON IN THE 1980'S, THE SPIRIT IS CLOSER TO THE KIND OF TIME-CAPSULE PRESERVATION OF THE PAST FAMILIAR IN THE WORK OF ARTISTS LIKE SHERRIE LEVINE AND MIKE BIDLO, WHO WOULD PRESENT FACSIMILES OF THE HEROIC DECADES OF MODERN ART AS EXPERIENCED IN A POST-MODERNIST AGE OF FAXES. BUT BURTON INSISTS ON WORKING FROM ORIGINALS, NOT REPRODUCTIONS, AND ALSO IMPOSES HIS OWN DISTINCTIVE TOUCH ON THESE DRAWINGS, WHICH

RESEMBLE THE CONTENTS OF NOTEBOOKS BOTH PRIVATE AND PRECIOUS. THIS SENSE OF AN ALMOST SACRED RECORD, BEARING LAYERS OF TIME AND HISTORY, IS APPARENT, TOO, IN THE MATERIALS USED IN MANY OF HIS ABSTRACT DRAWINGS, WHICH, EXECUTED ON LINEN, ARE THEN PASTED ONTO PAPER THAT, IN TURN, IS AFFIXED TO ANOTHER LINEN GROUND. THE EFFECT IS OF ANCIENT VELLUM, OF WEATHERED TREASURES PRESERVED FROM A DISTANT ERA. BUT THESE DISCIPLINARY EXERCISES, WHETHER DRAWN FROM THE GENIUS OF EXISTING WORKS OF ART OR FROM HIS OWN INVENTORY OF ABSTRACT PATTERNS, ARE THEN DIRECTED TO HIS OWN, MORE AMBITIOUS PICTORIAL GOALS.



NOWHERE IS THIS IMPULSE BETTER SEEN OR BETTER REALIZED THAN IN BURTON'S ONGOING SERIES OF BLACK-STRIPE PAINTINGS THAT ARE INSTANTLY RECOGNIZABLE AS HOMAGES TO STELLA'S LANDMARK CANVASES OF 1959-60. (THAT BURTON WAS BORN IN 1960 MAY SUGGEST HOW REMOTELY HISTORICAL STELLA'S WATERSHED PAINTINGS MUST NOW SEEM TO A YOUNGER GENERATION.) GIVEN THE MONASTIC RIGOR OF BURTON'S ART AND TEMPERAMENT, IT SEEMS PREDESTINED THAT HE CHOOSE AS AN IDOL OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP THIS MOST AUSTERE AND RUDIMENTARY MOMENT OF STELLA'S CAREER, WHEN THE GROUND PLAN WAS LAID OUT FOR ALL FUTURE CONSTRUCTION WORK. NOW, SOME THREE DECADES LATER, BURTON HAS DISINTERRED AND REVITALIZED THAT MOMENT, BEGINNING RESPECTFULLY UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE OLDER MASTER, BUT SWIFTLY CREATING A SPECIES OF BLACK-STRIPE PAINTINGS SO NEW THAT STELLA MIGHT WELL DISCLAIM HIS PATERNITY. (INCIDENTALLY, BURTON'S CONNECTIONS WITH STELLA, WHOM HE HAS NEVER MET, DISPLAY MORE EERIE COINCIDENCES: HE LIVES A FEW DOORS AWAY ON THE SAME SHORT GREENWICH VILLAGE STREET; AND HE WAS BORN IN TALLADEGA, ALABAMA, THE SITE OF THE RACE-CAR TRACK THAT PROVIDED THE NAME FOR ONE OF STELLA'S CIRCUIT SERIES.) AS WITH STELLA, THERE IS ABSOLUTE, PREDETERMINED METHOD IN THE MADNESS. IN BURTON'S CASE, THE BLACK STRIPES ARE CREATED LESS BY THE ARTIST'S HAND THAN BY AN INTELLECTUAL AND QUASI-MECHANICAL PROCESS, LIKE DRAWING WITH A COMPASS. WOODBLOCKS ARE ATTACHED TO A FEW CRITICAL POINTS ON THE CANVAS EDGE, AND FROM THESE GEOMETRIC CENTERS OF WHAT WILL BECOME A FRAGMENTARY WEDGE OF A CIRCLE, A WOODEN PLANK IS EXTENDED AS A SURROGATE PAINT BRUSH AND MODULE, CREATING WITH ITS ARCED MOVEMENTS ACROSS THE CANVAS A SERIES OF CONCENTRIC

BLACK STRIPES WHOSE RADIUS EXPANDS AND CONTRACTS WITH A STRICT BEAT. THE RESULTS HONOR THE MEMORY OF STELLA'S BLACK PAINTINGS WITH AN ALMOST MILITARY OBEDIENCE WHILE, AT THE SAME TIME, DRASTICALLY TRANSFORMING THEIR MONOLITHIC IMAGERY. FOR ONE THING, BURTON'S USE OF CONCENTRIC ARCS RATHER THAN PARALLELS AND PERPENDICULARS CREATES WARPED, SPIDERWEB-LIKE NETWORKS THAT HAVE A MORE ORGANIC FEEL, LIKE WAVES RADIATING FROM A PEBBLE DROPPED IN WATER. INDEED, THESE ARCED CONFIGURATIONS ALWAYS PRODUCE A WHITE, USUALLY TEAR-SHAPED VOID IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SYMMETRICAL PATTERN, WITH THE HYPNOTIC EFFECT OF A MAGIC SIGN, A KIND OF MANDALA OR OCCULT EMBLEM OF A SORT THAT BURTON HAD EARLIER EXPLORED IN SERIES OF PAINTED VARIATIONS ON CRUCIFORM AND PENTAGONAL SHAPES. BUT THIS SPIRITUAL RESONANCE IS COUNTERED BY THE MATERIAL EVIDENCE OF THE WAY THE PAINTINGS ARE CONSTRUCTED, WHICH BURTON LEAVES BEHIND AS PART OF WHAT TURNS OUT TO BE A GROWINGLY COMPLEX IMAGE. THE WOODBLOCKS, WHOSE ELEMENTARY CARPENTRY PROVIDES THE EXTERNAL SOURCES FOR THE CENTRAL POINTS OF THE ARCS PAINTED WITHIN THE HERALDIC IMAGE, ARE STILL AFFIXED TO THE CANVAS EDGE, INDICATING THE LITERAL PROCESS THROUGH WHICH THESE ABSTRACT ICONS WERE MADE. REVIVING ASPECTS OF MUCH SO-CALLED "PROCESS ART" OF THE 1970S, IN WHICH THE MEANS OF MAKING A WORK OF ART WERE PART OF THE ENDS, A TRAIL TO BE SEEN WITH THE FINISHED PRODUCT, BURTON OFFERS HERE A STARTLING COLLISION OF THE MOST INSUBSTANTIAL PICTORIAL FICTIONS—NEW VERSIONS OF BLACK HOLES AND WARPING COSMIC SPACES THAT EMERGE AS BOTH TAUT AND FRAGILE—WITH THE MOST TANGIBLE EVIDENCE OF THE WAYS IN WHICH A CARPENTER-GEOMETER COULD PRODUCE THESE PAINTINGS. SUCH A SEESAWING BETWEEN A LITERAL RECORD OF ACTUAL CONSTRUCTION, LIKE WORKING DRAWINGS FROM AN ARCHITECT'S OFFICE, AND ILLUSORY RESULT OF HOVERING, PAINTED MYSTERIES IS PART OF BURTON'S EVER SURPRISING ABILITY TO PRODUCE A SLOW AND STEADY BURN, IN WHICH WHAT STARTS OFF AS ALMOST TOO FORCEFULLY CLEAR YIELDS LAYER AFTER LAYER OF SUBLIMINAL CONTRADICTIONS. BURTON'S DISARMING WAY OF BEING BOTH DIRECT AND OBLIQUE, SINGLE-MINDED AND COMPLEX IS ALREADY AN AWESOME GIFT TO THE INTELLECT AND TO THE EYE, AND A GIFT WHOSE FUTURE ONLY THE ARTIST HIMSELF COULD IMAGINE AND CONSTRUCT.

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