Richmond Burton
MATRIX/BERKELEY 136

University Art Museum
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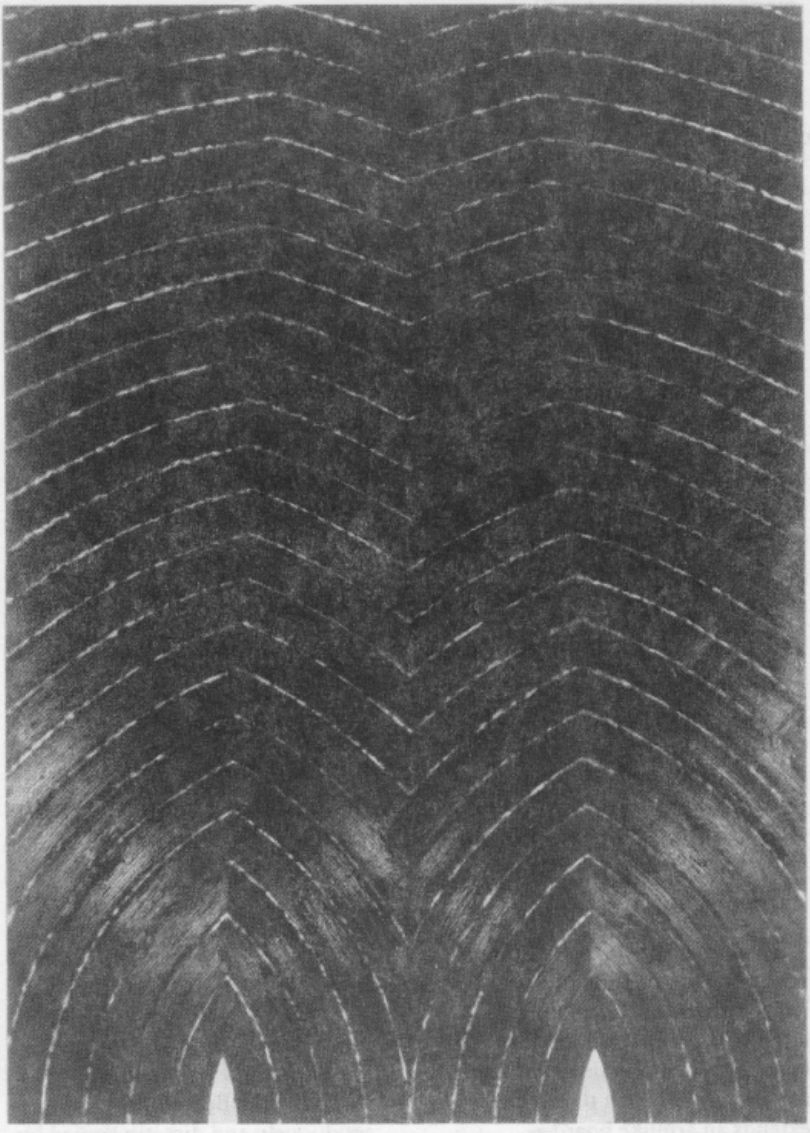
Thought Plane #13, 1989



"In the series of things, those which follow are always aptly fitted to those which have gone before," said the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius (121-180 A.D.), "for this series is not merely an enumeration of disjointed things...and as all existing things are arranged together harmoniously, so the things which come into existence exhibit no mere succession, but a certain wonderful relationship."1 Even in Aurelius's own time—with "barbarians" knocking at the gates of the Empire—his vision of a perfectly ordered, reasonable, and harmonious existence must have seemed a bit disingenuous; today it strikes us as absurd. Our world seems at once too dull and too frightening to sustain such idealism.

It comes, therefore, as something of a surprise to encounter the paintings of the young New York artist Richmond Burton. His large, abstract canvases possess a self-revealing order and clarity of purpose which suggest the existence of a universe still fathomable by human intelligence. In his ongoing series titled "Thought Planes," from which this exhibition features a selection, Burton's visual language is reduced to black stripes painted in tight concentric arcs. Within this self-imposed limitation, Burton effects the suggestion of vast space, dynamic ascent, and conceptual rigor.

The painting's formal clarity is the result of a method, unique to Burton's work, which involves affixing at various points along the edges of the canvas small wooden anchors from which the artist extends an armlike board—actually, an improvised compass—whose sweeping motions across the canvas create various arc patterns. Burton controls his compositions by determining where to place the wooden anchors along the canvas's edges and by orchestrating the lines of convergence of the various arcs. By leaving the small anchors attached to the canvas, Burton acknowledges the logic of his image-making process.

Burton's use of a mechanism, albeit a primitive one, rather than a hand-held brush to paint his canvases, further emphasizes the constructed, architectural element implicit in their archlike imagery. In fact, Burton is a trained architect, having worked for several years in the office of I.M. Pei, for whom he drew numerous studies for the Louvre's new glass pyramid entrance. Contrary to Pei's quintessentially Modernist style, however, Burton appears more drawn to the manner of an earlier age, the time of the cathedral builders, when architect and artisan were one and the same.

It is easier to understand Burton's work in relation to artists of previous generations than to those of his own. One is immediately reminded, for instance, of Frank Stella's seminal black-stripe paintings of 1958-60, which, like Burton's works, depend on a logic internal to the structure of the works themselves (the width of the stripes in Stella's paintings, for example, is equal to the width of his canvases' stretcher bars). Beyond Stella, Burton's work owes a debt to pioneers of "pure" abstraction such as Kasimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian, whose works Burton has assiduously and directly copied by hand into his notebooks. Despite their austerity, Burton's paintings are not without reference to the visible world. The Gothic arch motif, for example, may derive specifically from the stone architecture of the Brooklyn Bridge, beneath which Burton kept his studio for many years. Indeed, Burton's works resemble the painter Joseph Stella's Art Deco celebrations of the Brooklyn Bridge as much as they do Frank Stella's Minimalist geometry. Far from celebratory, however, Burton's paintings suggest, even more, the melancholy mood of the printmaker and draughtsman of the 1920s and 1930s, Louis Lozowick, whose stark unpopulated urban scenes evoke conflicting moods of progress and alienation.

In this installation, Burton sets aside a unique space for contemplation that is, if not beyond the pressures and influences of contemporary history and culture, then at least suspended provocatively within them. His works are profoundly humanist in that they place the thinking individual once again at the center of experience. As such, Burton's paintings could almost be dismissed as sheer nostalgia; that is, if they didn't work so well. Their effectiveness in inspiring meditation and thought is proof enough that the power of the human mind has not yet run its course. In studying Burton's art, then, it may be helpful to keep in mind Marcus Aurelius's advice:

"Constantly regard the universe as one living being, having one substance and one soul; observe how all things have reference to one perception, the perception of this one living being; and how all things act with one movement; and how all things are the cooperating causes of all things which exist; observe too the continuous spinning of the thread and the contexture of the web."2

Richmond Burton was born in Talladega, Alabama, in 1960. He currently lives and works in New York City.

Lawrence Rinder

1. "The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius," *The Harvard Classics*, ed. Charles W. Eliot, trans. George Lang (New York: P.F. Collier & Son Corp., 1937), pp. 219-20.

2. *Ibid*, p. 219.

Works in MATRIX (all works are oil on canvas with wood unless otherwise indicated):

Thought Plane #5, 1989, 86 x 60". Lent by John Sacchi, New York.

Thought Plane #6, 1989, 87 x 60". Lent by the artist, courtesy Matthew Marks Inc., New York.

Thought Plane #8 (second version), 1990, 87 x 60". Lent by the artist, courtesy Matthew Marks, Inc., New York.

Thought Plane #13, 1989, 86 x 60". Lent by the artist, courtesy Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles.

Thought Plane #14, 1989, 86 x 60". Lent by Ruth Markowitz, Los Angeles.

Thought Plane #15, 1989, 87 x 63". Lent by Herbert and Lenore Schorr, Los Angeles.

Thought Plane #16, 1989, 86 x 63". Lent by Harry and Linda Macklowe, New York.

Thought Plane #17, 1989, 86 x 63". Lent by Daniel Weinberg, Los Angeles.

Thought Plane #18, 1989, 86 x 60". Lent by Ed Cauduro, Portland, Oregon.

Quintuple Thought Plane #2, 1989, oil on canvas on paper, 11-1/2 x 36". Private collection.

Study for "Room for Thinking," 1990, oil on canvas on paper, 9-5/8 x 70- 7/16". Lent by the artist, courtesy Matthew Marks, Inc., New York.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Postmasters Gallery, NYC '88; Mario Diacono Gallery, Boston '89 (catalog); Simon Watson, NYC '90 (catalog); Daniel Weinberg Gallery, L.A. '90 (catalog).

Selected group exhibitions:

Postmasters Gallery, NYC '88; Hirschl & Adler Modern, NYC, *Repetition* '89 (catalog); Simon Watson, NYC, *Erotophobia*, '89; Fernando Alcolea, Madrid, Spain, *Imagenes de la Abstraccion* '90.

Bibliography about the artist (see also catalogs under exhibitions):

Westfall, Stephen. "Richmond Burton," *Art in America*, April '88.

Siegel, Jeanne. "Richmond Burton," *Arts Magazine*, Jan. '89.

Bonetti, David. "Burton, Risoli, McNamara," *The Boston Phoenix*, May 5 '89, p. 10.

Selwyn, Marc. "Three Painters: The Pursuit of Formal, Optical and Tactile Investigations," *Flash Art*, Nov./Dec. '89.

Mahoney, Robert. "Richmond Burton," *Arts Magazine*, May '90.

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