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*Morgan McGivern*

RICHMOND BURTON  
Illusions of Simplicity

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# RICHMOND BURTON

## Illusions of Simplicity

BY SHERIDAN SANSEGUNDO

“I can’t control and predict results. When I’m getting close, I zero in on areas I like, areas that are successful. I don’t try to rush it and it usually works. I don’t lose many paintings.”

Richmond Burton has just completed a series of nine large pictures for a solo show that opens at the Goss Gallery in Dallas on Sept. 7. Exuberant swirls of turquoise, peach, black, and egg-yolk yellow eddy across the canvas, the patterns changing slightly from one painting to the next.

The works are voluptuous and erotic, as are earlier ones with grid-based patterns that are more geometric, with trapezoids in ice-cream pastels, metallic silver triangles, and sneaky little barbs of ultramarine.

But before the viewer can sink into a pleasurable, pattern-induced torpor, a nugget of anxiety creeps in. What is that little hole? In every work, at first indistinguishable from the rest of the design, there is a small painted aperture, a slit, a tiny sucking vortex hinting at something lying underneath.

Perhaps it is a pebble thrown into water, generating the patterns like ripples. Perhaps an escape hatch. Perhaps, as Auden wrote, “the crack in the teacup opens / A lane to the land of the dead.”

“Beauty is an antidote to anxiety. I keep looking for a way to increase the feelings of pleasure and harmony — but these are anxious times and anxiety is undoubtedly part of the paintings,” Mr. Burton said.

The studio where he paints, and where Elaine de Kooning painted before him, seems to act like a magnet for the famed East End light, bouncing off Northwest Harbor on one side and Gardiner’s Bay on the other.

“It is like a fragment of some architectural ideal,” said Mr. Burton of the glow that suffuses the large space, qualifying that by saying the studio’s original peach floor had been carrying things a bit too far. “I couldn’t use the color in my work. Now the floor is a neutral gray and the peach is back in my paintings where it belongs.”

After years of shuttling back and forth between New York and East Hampton he has decided that East Hampton, for himself and a big friendly dog called Jeff, is home. He hasn’t been into the city in months.

“I love the long days. Things go so fast when you are painting in natural light. I’ve been really productive. As a painter, one’s space is really important.”

Light is important, but water, in all its reflective volatility, almost equally so, both in his life and as a recurrent element of his art. He learned to swim when he was 2 years old, became the youngest person ever to gain a Red Cross certificate, and went on to become a championship swimmer. He still jumps into the water every morning at Sammy’s Beach, rain or shine.

Mr. Burton has been working through a very fruitful period, with a show at Cheim and Reid in Manhattan last year and at the Drawing Room in East Hampton earlier this summer. Before that, it had taken him a while to find his equilibrium again after a major solo show, of many years’ work, opened on Sept. 11, 2001.

“My show at Cheim and Reid was so well received and I think I really needed that. I hadn’t shown for a while and I had become a little isolated.”

With a history of successful solo shows, from San Francisco to Zurich, and two monographs of his work published, Mr. Burton has found his niche. But it was very different in his youth when, growing up artistic and gay in Talladega, a small town in Alabama, he felt unhappy and out of place.

“I hung out with my grandmother, who was an artist and ceramicist, and learned to make art as a recipe for sanity and self-exploration.”

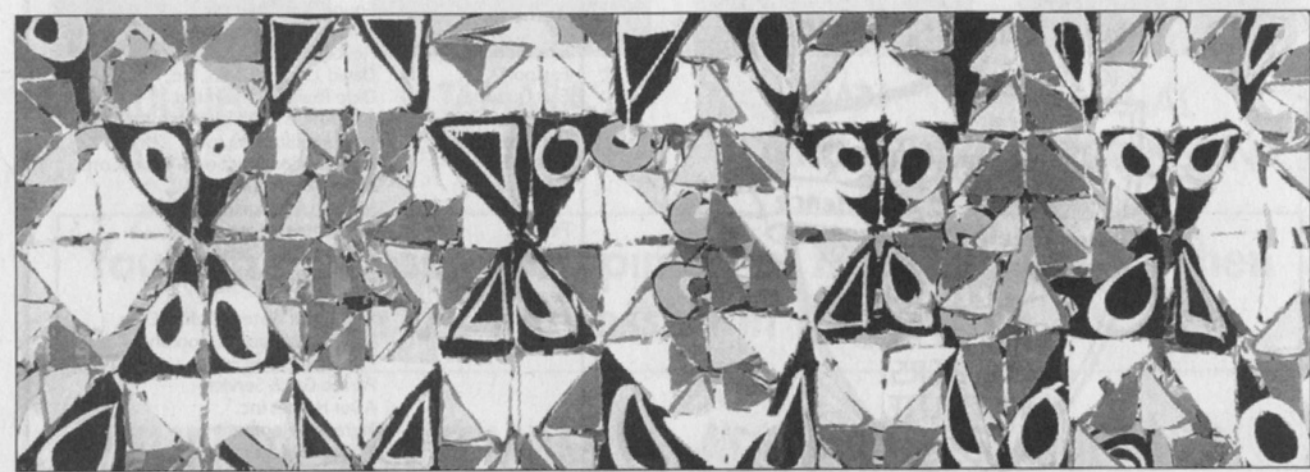
To please his parents, he studied architecture at Rice University. When he finally achieved his dream of going to New York City it was not as a painter but to work for the architect I.M. Pei. One of his jobs, working on the gridded structure of the Louvre pyramid, was directly translated into the art he was making at the time — rigid, black, gridded paintings.

While he was still working for Mr. Pei, an East Village gallery gave him his first show, and that show gave him his entree into the downtown art world, where he discovered the work of artists such as Philip Taaffe, Sherrie Levine, Mike Bidlo, and Ross Bleckner.

Mr. Burton, who is in his 40s, belongs to the generation of appropriationists, and his work is full of subtle allusions to Art Nouveau, Islamic mosaics, Byzantine icons, and other artists, from Malevich to Pollock.

In the early 1990s, color began to creep into his paintings, then broke through and took over, relaxing and softening the grids. By the late ’90s he was making paintings that were more organ-

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"Tribal Flashers" was painted in 1999.

## *Richmond Burton: Illusions of Simplicity*

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ic, rhythmic, with intimations of rippling water and sunlight through leaves.

"If you look at many artists, Gorky or Agnes Martin, for example, they get simpler as they go on. It's a lifelong pursuit, that's why I find it so challenging

and engaging. It is always surprising."

Although the paintings look spontaneous, they have their origins in sketchbooks that the artist carries with him wherever he goes. On linen squares pasted to the pages, his own preparatory sketches alternate with ev-

idence of his immersion in the work of other artists: jewel-like watercolors of every Malevich in a retrospective in Amsterdam, copies of Roman mosaics, details of Picassos and Braques and Gericaults.

He has just embarked on a new series of predominantly yellow paintings. The first one glowed in a corner of the studio, an exuberant grid of yellow triangles as sensual as melted butter.

Mr. Burton has never made an abrupt transition from one style to another. Instead, his paintings have followed a path of steady and consistent change over the years. Their simplicity is an illusion; the more you look, the more esoteric, multifaceted, and referential they become. As he finds them himself, they are full of surprises.