

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2004

ARTS & LETTERS

GALLERY-GOING

By DAVID COHEN

The phrase "mystical decoration," by no means a pejorative, can be used to link painters as diverse as Hunt Slonem, with his expansive, whimsical and diffuse paintings of birds, butterflies, and saints, and Richmond Burton, whose eye-candy abstraction probes a tantric psychedelia at the heart of organic systems and repeating patterns.

RICHMOND BURTON

Cheim & Read

HUNT SLONEM: RECENT WORK

Marlborough Chelsea

REED DANZINGER

McKenzie Fine Art

This month and next, painting that is sumptuous in unabashedly pretty effect but nonetheless spiritually edifying in intention holds sway in the galleries. Robert Kushner's flower paintings on sliding Japanese doors at DC Moore also qualify. And Caio Fonseca, who will show next month at Paul Kasmin, taps a similar aesthetic of decentered design and whimsical arabesque. While all these artists are happy to tease the viewer with an element of campness, what is more compelling and intriguing about them is that they usually back away from overt irony.

Despite marked differences in temper and taste between Mr. Burton and Mr. Slonem, there are surprising commonalities: repetition, passivity, and use of the grid. But, then, Mr. Burton has a Zelig-like capacity to blend with many artists his work brings to mind. Take the five recent paintings in the main gallery at Cheim & Read: These works, which reintroduce the grid motif banished from his imagery in the mid-1990s, relate equally to the tight, obsessively realized pattern making of James Siena and the ferociously expressive nested lines of Terry Winters.

At first, this new series seems a radical departure from the body of work that confirmed Mr. Burton as one of the most exuberant and epicurean of abstract painters. Yet three other pieces, created concurrently and presented in Cheim & Read's chapel-like front gallery, recall the boisterous, curvaceous, florally inspired motifs of his "I am" series of the early 2000s.

"Solex" (2003), a 5-foot-square arrangement of three panels, has what can read subjectively as a brilliant yellow stamen chased by filaments of turquoise and purple and hemmed in by radically cropped, pulsating orange leaves. By Mr. Burton's standards, the images in this room are

unusually iconic, as redolent of Georgia O'Keefe as of Lee Krasner (with whom his name is often linked). Though much is in flux, the forms are centered in a way that intimates a higher order of stasis.

The grids, meanwhile, caught on the diagonal, work in an opposite direction, insisting on alloverness and the possibility of endless repetition. Horizontal in format, they intimate vistas, a shift in scale from the microscopic. They are more muted and restrained in color, but are still a long way from reduction or ubiquity. What animates these compositions is a sense of the grid transgressed, waves of pattern and nascent forms suggested by the contractions and expansions of the laticework. The organic is seen to grow from geometric decay.

The diversity of this show could equally demonstrate restless formal curiosity or a hedging of stylistic bets. A third space shows yet another line of inquiry: "Freak Out" (2004) is a compact, densely packed composition of yin-yang and comma motifs. A washed-out feeling in the color and surface lends the canvas the remoteness of printed fabric.

Like Karin Davie and Bruce Pearson, Mr. Burton is happy to play with connotations of retro décor. You then start to notice similar traits in works that had initially seemed more earnest. "Solex," which can't have been divided into three sections for logistical reasons, comes to seem a knowing nod in the direction of fin de siècle screens. The work, by signaling applied art and playing with ideas of genre hierarchy, retreats from claims to higher authority.

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Richmond Burton at Cheim & Read until October 23 (547 W. 25th Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, 212-242-7727) Prices: \$40,000-\$65,000.



Richmond Burton, "Freak Out" (2004).

CHEIM & READ