

The term “abstract” fails to evoke the unforgiving rigor of the paintings by San Franciscan John Meyer (1943-2002) that George Lawson has just brought back to light after many years in storage or in private hands.

Meyer’s paintings frustrate description in any other than technical terms and so tend to polarize opinion. Many people have little tolerance for artworks that resist viewers’ projections of narrative or emotion onto them, as Meyer’s do. Some observers recognize intuitively and resent that such resistance amounts to minimizing their own constructive role in encounters with art. But shifting variances in the invitations that artworks make to us are among the pleasures of exploring them, or ought to be.

Meyer’s late paintings, especially the black and white diptychs here, plus a sleek, large all-black pair, mark an extreme of cold objectivity, displaying more affinity with, say, the metal sculpture of Donald Judd (1928-1994) than with the asperities of paintings by Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967) or Agnes Martin (1912-2004).

Meyer took great care fabricating wood supports for his late work, seeking as consistently flat a surface as his carpentry could achieve.

Formalist critics, especially Clement Greenberg (1909-1994), made much of perceived flatness as one of the qualities through which modernist painting distinguished its claims on our attention from those of all the other contemporaneous arts. But the severity of Meyer’s work has seemed all along very distant from that parochial controversy of the 1960s.

A viewer bent on interpretation might sense a Manichean impulse behind Meyer’s black and white diptychs, a mystic inclination to halve the real into domains of light and darkness.

Meyer did not try to speak for a movement or a moment, but merely for his own singular creative interests. In conversation he claimed really not to know, beyond the barest material definition, what constitutes a painting as an object of interest. He worked driven partly by the effort to find out. He favored the demanding and old-fashioned medium of egg tempera, he said, because “it cannot be adapted to vagueness.”

The installation at Lawson permits visitors to see that the incidence of light on the paintings’ surfaces matters crucially to their definition, or self-definition. Yet even the surest perception of such aspects, under what seem close to ideal viewing conditions, feels tentative, subject to vagaries of changing daylight, viewing angle and our common incapacity finally to see as others see. Explicitness and elusiveness converge in Meyer’s work with an intensity we seldom see in contemporary art, irrespective of style. That flavor of experience can reach an exquisite, almost excruciating intensity in paintings where Meyer brought color into play, such as “Untitled Diptych #6 (Blue/White)” (1994).

Lawson’s Meyer show is an important event. It reintroduces work that contends for canonical status to a generation of art students and probably even many collectors who may have seen it before only in faithless reproduction, if ever.

To mark the exhibition, Lawson has published a handsome catalog. It documents Meyer’s work and his working process. And here I must confess an interest, as the catalog also collects old and new texts about Meyer. It turns out that I had written more often about Meyer’s art than any other critic, and the catalog reprints every piece, including the artist’s obituary. ■



JOHN MEYER
Untitled Diptych #6 (Blue/White), 1994
egg tempera and pigment on gessoed, cradled oak panels