

ALEXANDRE

Irving Sandler Essay for Sally Hazelet Drummond, Artists Space, February 25 through March 24, 1984; February 1989

In the mid-fifties, Sally Hazelet Drummond was a mainstay of the Tanager Gallery, the first and leading of the artists cooperatives on Tenth Street and an example for the many which followed. It is fitting that she should exhibit at Artists Space, an alternative gallery now in its tenth year and a prototype for dozens throughout America, since at its inception its founders had the Tanager Gallery very much in mind. More important, this show is a tribute to Drummond as an artist.

When Drummond first began to show on Tenth Street, the common denominator of New York School painting was a “painterly” or “gestural” look. Although art in this vein was generally labeled Abstract Expressionism, most of it was neither abstract nor Expressionist in the sense of being violent or aggressive, raw and “ugly.” However, Expressionist painters, for example de Kooning, Kline and young artists inspired by them, did receive relatively more attention than their quieter colleagues, such as Guston.

In fact, fifties painting was far more varied than it is now remembered to have been. And if there was violence, there was also lyricism – and contemplation, none quieter than Drummond’s abstract images. And yet, they were shocking, more shocking than most of the canvasses which set out to shock. The reason was that Drummond’s pictures were monochromatic fields, coloristic and painterly to be sure but too minimal to be accepted by more than a few handfuls of artists and critics.

Drummond had no intention at all of shocking anyone. She simplified color and gesture, ending up with one-color fields of subtly nuanced surfaces, in order to create a “World of Silent Painting,” as she wrote at the time. In 1956, Drummond began to deepen slightly the color in the centers of her pictures, providing a focus for contemplation. By 1960, she began to use a pointillist technique to slowly build up a vibrating, all-over image and at the same time to accent more than before the centrifugal, aureole-like radiation. It was not only the finished image but the awareness of how it came into being, the pointillist technique itself, that generated a meditative mood. The viewer re-experienced to slow single-minded addition of dot to dot, each subtly modulated in tone so as to create a luminous field. Since 1960 Drummond has been refining and intensifying her serene and radiant images.

A final historic note: last winter, two excellent and much-discussed gallery shows – Paint as Image at the Max Hutchinson Gallery and New Abstraction at Sidney Janis Gallery – featured painterly monochromatic abstractions. Neither included Sally Hazelet Drummond, most likely because her work was not well enough known to the organizers. The omission was unfortunate since it was she and the late Ben Isquith, with an eye to Reinhardt on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to Guston, who ushered in the tendency during the early fifties. Thus, the Artists Space show offers works that help set history straight and, more important, that, to paraphrase Matisse, soothe the soul.

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