

FOCI: Judith Geichman

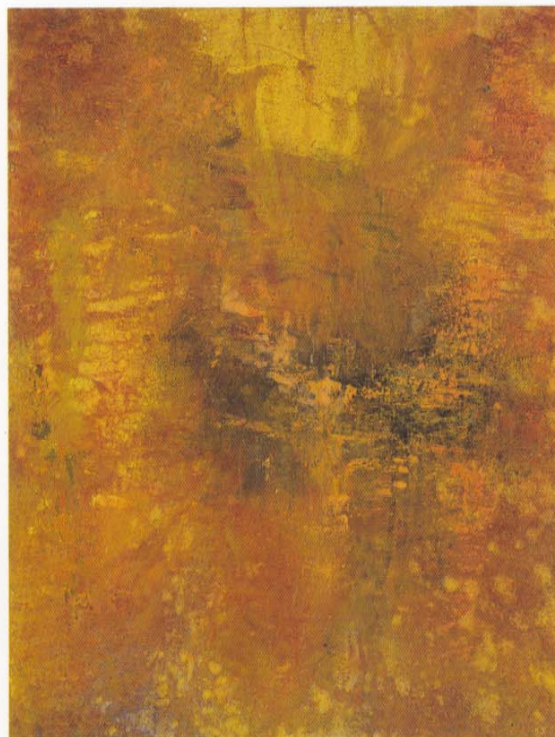
Introduction

The Illinois State Museum proudly presents the artwork of Judith Geichman in the first installment of the three-part solo series FOCI (Forms of Contemporary Illinois). FOCI, now in its third season, has been designed as a forum for artwork which is absolutely current. Each solo exhibition will focus on a contemporary Illinois artist with a particular and significant approach to artmaking. This program is funded in part by the Illinois Arts Council, a State agency.



Judith Geichman believes. She believes that existence matters, that life is a complex and multi-leveled journey, and that there is a requisite dignity in a search for meaning along the way. She believes too that art matters, and that it provides for her the surest vehicle for her incessant explorations, for her pursuit of a discovery of revelation. Geichman seeks, and her recent paintings churn and seethe toward states of emotional and spiritual resolution. She knows that belief is often the residue of the search for truth; these abstract and gestural paintings are her search, and their end is her truth.

Her recent paintings come, of course, out of the years of work preceding them, years in which Geichman first achieved her reputation in Chicago as a painter of symbolic forms and places. Images of temples, of psychic holy sites imbued with chaotic spiritual dramas marked her work then, pictures that attempted to codify almost religious orders and sought to demarcate structures of faith. Soon these structures were toppled and overturned, as Geichman began to move toward



Dipper, 1991,
oil and wax
on canvas

Photo: Tom Van Eynde

investigating the essences these temples housed. Her work started to leave the altar far behind, in the much more demanding search for the spirit that altars were created to sheathe.

This search inexorably led Geichman toward abstraction. Her agenda allowed her to widen her pursuit beyond pictorializing existing schemes of faith into using paint and canvas themselves as charged metaphors for existence. At first that involved for Geichman the rendering of fantastic structures, and in the late 1980s her paintings saw the appearance of curious apparatuses, odd ambiguous machines that hovered in topsy-turvy and indeterminate spaces. Rendered largely in limited palettes of orange, tan, and black, these works had very dynamic surfaces achieved with impetuous brushwork, possessing a very powerful presence. Geichman's structures seemed briefly to assert their existence, and then began to seek to return to the chaos from which they had come. Form still had retained a cachet for her, it was an opening, a rubric, a hook on which she could extrapolate into wonder and fantasy.

Over the past two years, though, Geichman has systematically broken her inquiry down to its absolute core, its fundamental essence. She begins with nothing and goes she knows not where, seeking, always seeking every moment with every stroke, for an equipoise, a resolution, a harmony, a moment of peace, an apt gesture, a correct response, giving to each canvas what it seems to demand, struggling with her materials, her ideas, and her temporality. Each rather large painting becomes its own overwhelming universe, an arena, a situation that must be rescued from failure, that must be saved from each and every moment in its history, prepared from the next moment that is to come, until a finality is achieved.

It is not surprising to learn that these recent paintings are the result of arduous labors; Geichman blends dozens of layers of paint and wax on each of her canvases, brewing them like potions, covering, recovering, and discovering meaning in and on her veils of liquid material. Line and form are submerged, forever obscured beneath strata of paint. Sometimes while working on them she moves her pictures to and fro, from the wall to the floor, and several works in this exhibition began upside down from how they are now shown. Each one is a history, a record of a process of making, the residue of Geichman's determination to wring being out of nothingness and to flaunt nothingness with her being. There is a point in every work where Geichman shifts from being completely active to a more reactive role, as she starts to respond to the needs of the painting she herself engendered. And each one has its own particular perfume, its own psychological and emotional weight for the viewer to uncover. Sometimes that perfume is difficult to name in words, but it is nonetheless present, some important message resting just on the periphery of consciousness.

This layering, this intense concentration of content and material, eventually leads these paintings toward monochrome. But how incredibly rich are Geichman's ochres, siennas, grays, oranges, golds, olives, and cadmium yellows! *Dipper* has an almost organic warmth, a condensation of chroma seeming to throb with the potential for life. *Punt* is both cooler and more circumspect, a steadier inquiry into deeper space, full of a kind of cosmological gravity. *Aidadomeda* is the most explosive of all, splayed out like a Whistler *Nocturne*, a joyful noise cascading across canvas.

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Punt, 1991,
oil and wax
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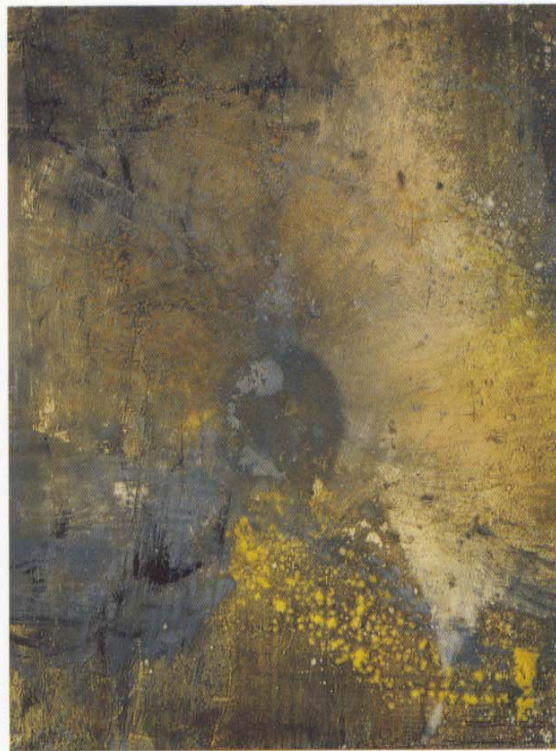


Photo: Tom Van Eynde

Note in this last work how a forthright dribble of orange paint in the lower left had to be reconciled, tempered, with a large orange-brown area at the right of her canvas. Each gesture and element in Geichman's art postulates its potential counterpoint, but not always to balance it; Geichman sometimes willfully piles on data to enhance an uncovered feeling, allowing arabesques of color and stroke to move these works toward realms of emotive spirit.

The stature of Geichman's achievement, the quality that has led her to become one of Chicago's finest abstract painters, finally extends beyond the tale of any individual painting. In many ways it is her omnipresent integrity and the decided conviction with which she seeks for meaning that calls her work to our attention. We live in an age of irony, in a world coyly calling individual experience into question, enshrining homogeneity and doubting the possibilities of personal authenticity. Geichman's art is none of this, and is a corrective to some of the smarmy excess of our age, a reminder that artmaking can be a dignified task, a discipline where some of the core issues surrounding human existence can be paralleled and made visible. She recently wrote: "I am still caught by the conception that painting is a noble act, whose outcome has to do with the ability to transcend, which has to do with imagination and reverie. The struggle is to go towards the life force, energy, beauty, wholeness, and life affirmation." Judith Geichman not only continues in her struggle, but achieves something even more wondrous: she makes us care about the outcome.

James Yood
Northwestern University