

"On Condition," an exhibition of contemporary paintings curated by Chicago artist Julia Fish, presented a fine collection of extremely thoughtful work. The penchant for reexamination of the complexities of painting's visceral language can, at moments, seem a frustrating and repetitive task for artists, critics, and art viewers alike. However, with this show Fish uncovered an engaging way to remind both the reverent and the skeptical of painting's eminent capacity to inspire reflection on its own principles, mechanics, and effects as well as these characteristics' analogous reflection of society's greater social, political, aesthetic, or psychological issues. "On Condition"'s subtitle, "Painting Between Abstraction and Representation," disclosed the curator's own interest in the paradoxical nature of the medium, ultimately uncovering painting's ability to both lull and confront the viewer, to be simultaneously didactic and diplomatic.

Fish's broad selection of artists allowed her (and the viewer's) investigation to be addressed from virtually every angle. While the works did not initially appear directly connected, an alliance between them emerged from their quiet dialogue conducted on the ground of their common media. Kevin Wolff's *Hole* clearly images a hole in an anonymous wall alongside a studied depiction of the focal object's mirrored reflection. As the viewer is led to contemplate the artist's depicted and metaphoric reflection, the looming reality of Wolff's subtly painted black hole silently draws one into the confines of his canvas. We have essentially fallen down the rabbit hole and are now subject to art's subjective logic. The arrival at this juncture allows the viewer to realize that things are not always as they seem. Upon the carefully developed ground of Thomas Nozkowski's *Untitled* lies a complexly constructed form of abstract marking. The intentionality of Nozkowski's abstraction is so concrete that it transcends itself, becoming, as stated in Fish's curatorial essay, "a representation of an abstraction." Here Nozkowski's abstraction is as Wolff's hole; the literal becoming the metaphoric, the metaphoric becoming the literal.

Both Kay Rosen and Cheonae Kim seize the definitive forms of the linguistic, then distort, dissect, or obscure them, revealing unforeseen communicative devices. Rosen's *Odd/Even* plainly presents the letters of the title's words hidden behind clean black rectangles. The three blocks of "odd" are stacked, centered, atop the four of "even," configuring the foundation of a symmetrical pyramid. A diagram for the viewer, *Odd/Even* spells out an essential connection between these two antonyms that would not be nearly so clear were the actual letters in evidence. Rosen's tight artistic choice of rendering her image in enamel sign paint speaks well to her work's declarative spirit which emits a crisp visceral sensibility. Kim's dissection of letter forms results in a grid-like patterning reminiscent of mathematical graphs or structural blueprints. Despite its resemblance to such instructive forms, the piece remains enigmatic. However, the work's tidy lines are betrayed by Kim's occasionally evident pencil under-drawing, disclosing the intrinsic logic elemental to the abstraction's creation.

Nancy Chunn's *Panama: Decades of Deals* asserts the most overtly political agenda, employing the academic elements of painting as languidly as other artworks employ expressive brushstrokes. The work's compositional planes, both literal and metaphoric, melt easily into one another, guiding the viewer's eye through the intricate construction of visual (literal) and political (metaphoric) relationships.

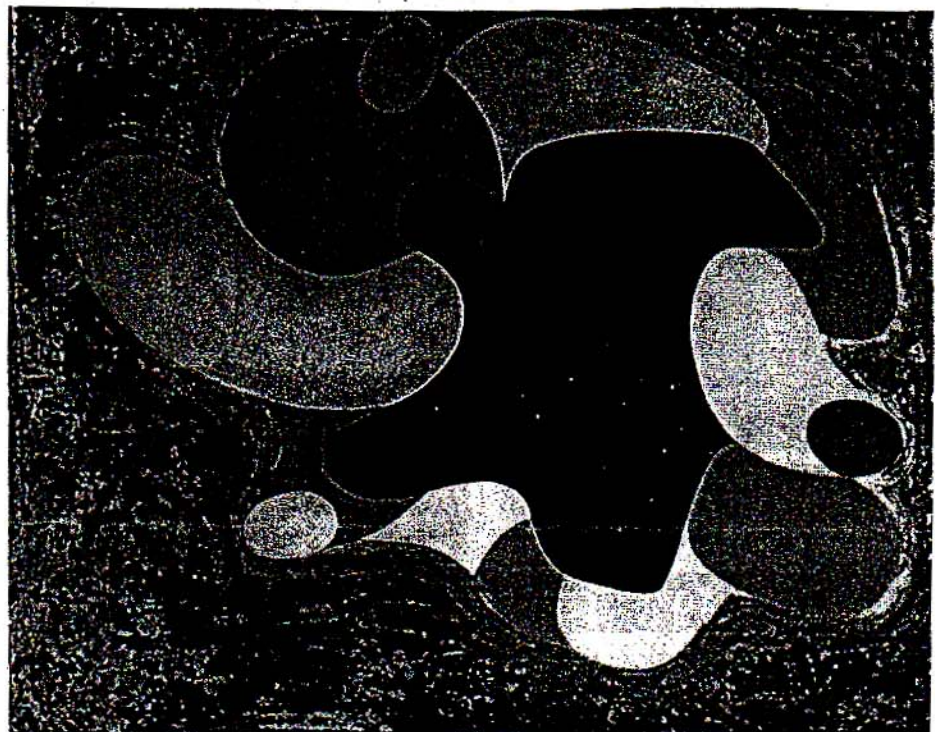
The caliber of the art comprising "On Condition" provides a wealth of analyses (both academic and vernacular) to painting's insightful dialect. Moreover, the show's variety of historical influences maintains the strength of the medium in the face of Postmodernism's backward glance. Collectively, the works of this exhibition stand as a consanguineous order confidently beckoning the viewer forward to examine their very pertinent message.

Deborah Wilk

On Condition

Gallery 400

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THOMAS NOZKOWSKI, "Untitled," 1991, oil on canvas-board, 16" x 20". Photo courtesy of Gallery 400.