

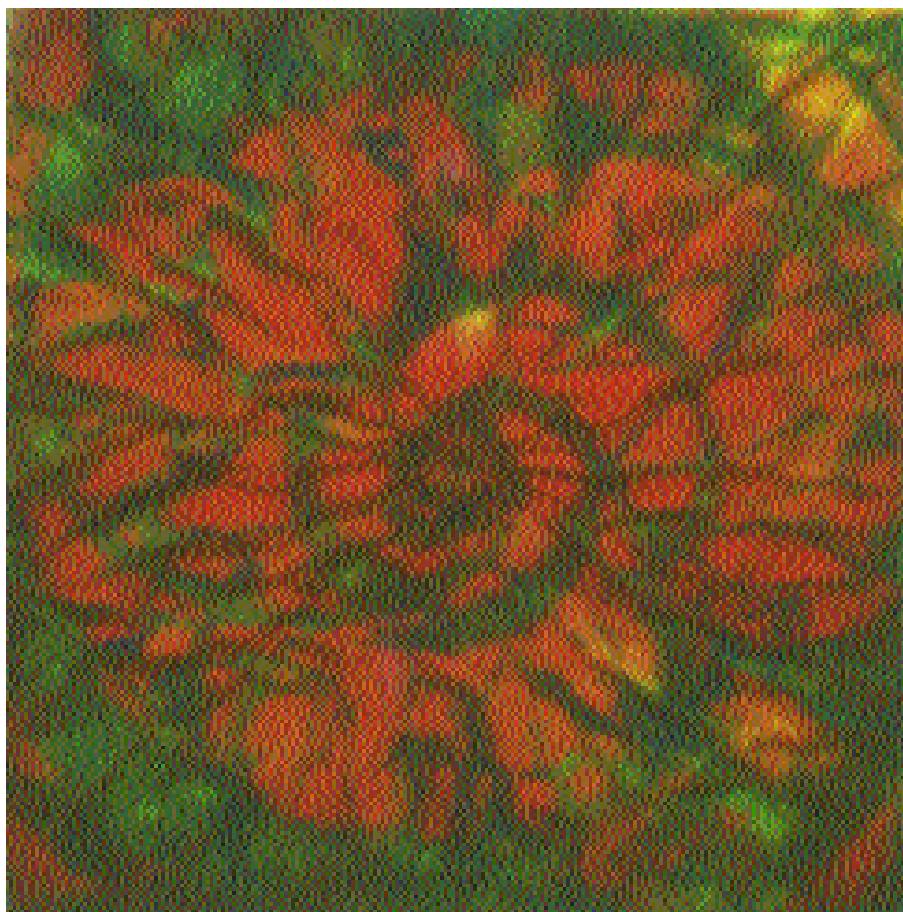
Abstraction and Allusion in the Art of Nobuko Tanabe

One of the things that differentiates postmodern abstraction from modernist abstraction is that in recent decades many artists feel freer to acknowledge content—or at least allusions to some external reality—in their nonobjective paintings. For many years it was necessary for abstract artists to assume a defensive posture, especially when dealing with a philistine mass media that was all too willing to misinterpret, satirize, and otherwise trivialize their work. To avoid having their paintings and sculptures interpreted in the manner of Rorschach tests and to emphasize the primacy of formal qualities, abstract artists tended to deny content altogether. While deemed necessary at the time to avoid having simplistic meanings attributed to their art, such denials of content were simplistic in themselves, since to abstract literally means to distill the essential essence of an experience or actual thing, and as someone once put it, “You can’t abstract from nothing.”

Which brings us to the Japanese artist Nobuko Tanabe, whose work was seen recently at Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, and who freely acknowledges that she draws inspiration for her seemingly minimalist paintings from nature. Granted, Tanabe’s paintings stand up very well on their own without explication. One can appreciate them strictly for their formal qualities, which are quite considerable. However, understanding the artist’s intentions adds an element of natural allusiveness to Tanabe’s works which enhances their overall effect and enriches one’s enjoyment of them.

Created with gesso, acrylic, gouache, and glue on canvas, Tanabe’s paintings are possessed of sensual textures which the artist achieves by crumpling the surface rather than through building up thick impastos. In fact, her paints appear to be highly diluted and applied thinly in the manner of “stain” painters like Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis, yet the furrows and folds that she creates in the surface lend her paintings a striking tactility. The physical quality of the surface suggests a rugged terrain over which the flow of Tanabe’s luminous colors create a flickering sense of liquid movement and light. This innate radiance is enhanced by the compositions of her pieces, which are often vortex-like, with the colors flowing toward the edges of the canvas from a central point.

In some of her recent paintings, particularly three works that share the title “Object,” Tanabe forsakes the rectangular format for roughly circular shapes that can also suggest floral forms with their labial puckers and folds creating a swirling effect. Thus, as the titles of these works



“Explosion of the Sun”

indicate, Tanabe emphasizes the “objectness” of the support in the manner of “shaped canvas” artists such as Lucio Fontana and Ellsworth Kelly who emerged in the United States and Europe in the 1960s. In the more pluralistic spirit of postmodernism, however, Tanabe combines irregularly shaped formats and relief-like surfaces with the more ethereal chromatic qualities of Color Field painting, synthesizing these different tendencies with surprising success.

Even more germane to the deeper significance of Tanabe’s work, however, is how successfully her paintings make the connection between aspects of the Color Field and Abstract Expressionist schools. This is an important, often-ignored link, since Color Field was in fact an extension of Abstract Expressionism, particularly in relation to the work of Jackson Pollock, to which Tanabe appears to pay tribute in her painting “From a Deep Sea,” with its overall composition of swirling blue, green, and yellow color areas.

Equally energetic is another rectangular canvas called “Magna,” in which fiery red and yellow hues set against a deep blue ground radiate outward from a central corona. Then there is “Explosion of the

Sun,” an equally dynamic painting notable for its bold and brilliant conflagration of red and green forms, simultaneously suggesting solar heat and the verdant growth it begets.

In an earlier issue of *Gallery&Studio* another critic wrote about the allusiveness of Tanabe’s abstractions, accurately noting that they can suggest any number of subjects, including “craters, wombs, anuses, stars, explosions and all of these things simultaneously.” Tanabe’s most recent paintings are equally allusive, even as their formal qualities grow stronger and even while it is possible to savor them for their chromatic and textural qualities alone. It is just this ambiguity that makes this gifted Japanese artist’s work so appealing and potentially important. Indeed, Nobuko Tanabe gives us the best of two worlds: the purely formal beauty that we traditionally expect from abstract painting as well as a poetic evocativeness which in this case seems the added bonus of a truly singular aesthetic sensibility. Indeed, Nobuko Tanabe’s paintings exemplify the best and possibly most enduring qualities of postmodern abstraction.

—Lawrence Downes