

ART

By Benjamin Forgey

A Virtuoso Talent Finds a Firm Footing

The problem of what to paint is particularly acute for virtuoso painters, be they abstract or figurative artists or something in between. Talent is such a temptation. The hand wants to run off on its own, outpacing the mind, sometimes for the better, often for the worse.

Ann Purcell's innate gifts, her feeling for the flow of paint and for color and light, have been apparent from the time of her initial show at the Corcoran four years ago. Her work since then has by no means denied this promise, but she has indeed been huffing and puffing at breakneck speed. There were always exceptional passages to admire; completely satisfactory works were harder to come by.

In her recent abstract paintings on view at the Osuna Gallery, Purcell seems to have the problem licked. Not surprisingly, each of the five large works in the show conforms to a system that places her spontaneity within an ordered and at its best a quite complicated context.

The paintings consist of fragments of canvas, cut into variously sized segments and then glued together. In process clearly akin to the Matisse cutouts and in composition related to the Frank Stella reliefs (even though they are flat and based mainly on rectangular units), the paintings possess a visual exuberance that is closer to, say, Robert Rauschenberg without the imagery. The artist gave them a title that fits both process and effect: the "Playground" series.

In a way, these are big paintings made up of a lot of smaller paintings. The larger segments tend to be read as grounds for the smaller units, but even so they often retain a surprisingly distinct presence. The small pieces are very much paintings-within-a-painting, each given a sharply different identity in color, surface and motif (bright checks to somber stripes to gestural abstractions and so on). Part of the fun of reading pictures such as the magisterial, mural-size "Playground

4" is to see Purcell wittily ticking off homages — here a Barnett Newman "zip," there a Robert Motherwell elegy. But most of the pleasure comes from experiencing a strongly intuited structure made up of many satisfying parts. Through Jan. 31 at 406 Seventh St. NW.

One of Ann Purcell's "Playground" series (1980) at the Osuna Gallery.

