

ANN PURCELL

Few abstract painters in Ann Purcell's position are as savvy as she. Like many who were beginning to successfully challenge color field's hegemony in the mid-1970s, only to be swamped by the upheavals of decoration and expressionism, she remains a bit stunned by the gridlock that current trends have put on the painting marketplace. A moderate career success in her mid-thirties was soon followed up by the need for a fulltime job again, making Purcell a prime candidate for what a friend calls the "bitter factor": those scores of mid-career artists who used to sell a few works a year and now can't unload a lithograph. They're out there, seething with rage at all the young upstarts who sink their dough into resort property as long as the fashions last.

The bitter factor is worth considering in relation to Purcell's savvyness, because she sets herself up so that it bypasses her entirely. Purcell is oddly serene about art, believing it to be too flexible to be exploited and too mercurial to require translation. Her genuine enthusiasm for the new and risqué is tempered by aesthetic filters that translate everything she sees into her own visual idiom. So, whereas the very mention of Keith Haring makes some abstract painters stubbornly retreat ever further into Olitski- or Marden-land, others decide that their work needs some minor sprucing up, a contorted face hidden here or an expressionist brushstroke hidden there. Purcell is one of the few abstract artists I have spoken to who can say quite simply about Keith Haring that his color could use some thought.

A fervent disciple of modernism when practiced by the likes of Matisse or Pollock, she is all too aware that current figuration has little connection with her work. Yet Purcell, like few others, also recognizes the urgency with which drawing has reentered the pictorial ideology of today, and she sees it as a challenge worth taking on. Fortunately, whereas she is an emotional and intuitive colorist who de-



Ann Purcell, *Gypsy Wind*, 1983. Acrylic pieces, 72 x 60". Courtesy Group Gallery.

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velops her paintings with mesmerizing care, Purcell is an absolute virtuoso with line. Drawings of startling intensity characteristically litter her studio floor, a habit picked up a few years ago when she began piecing her paintings together by gluing fragments or smaller paintings onto a heavily worked surface. The psychic effort required by manipulating edge, mass, and composition in a single gesture of collage also necessitated the release of creating fast-paced drawings. But it was the drawings' content that began seeping into the canvases.

The pieced works, or "Playground Paintings," enjoyed some success at the time, but they also involved the first throes of Purcell's turning her back on Greenbergian ideas, which she finds valuable but all too apt to turn its adherents into Moonies. Having sprung from Washington color-field roots, her transition was just that much more difficult.

A solo exhibition at Washington's Osuna Gallery last autumn startled some local viewers in that it indicated Purcell's even more recent

changes clearly, but also straddled the fence where her earlier, less tactile work was concerned. Writing in the *Washington Times* (10/22/82), critic Jane Allen noted that Purcell's more complex works were invariably her best. Since then, the artist has followed through on the possibilities of painterly line more inventively, and has hit upon a stylistic hybrid that indulges gesturally ambitions without sacrificing color or aping the current histrionics of expressionism.

In *Gypsy Wind*, one of the more successful works Purcell showed in Provincetown, it is clear how the actual velocity of painted lines has replaced the metaphoric velocity of her pieced paintings. A wide, staggered vertical line staked near the left edge, tilted at a slight diagonal, crosses axes with two horizontal forms which grope toward the left edge, but are bluntly cropped on the right. By anchoring her composition this way, Purcell gives the free-floating color forms in her work a tough, visceral quality. She has also developed numerous methods for applying thin lines, drips, oilstick callig-

raphy, and controlled skeins of color that act as chromatic splinters within the picture, holding the frontal plane in place but balancing the stable pictorial structure with a new sense of disorderliness.

Purcell has always worked with a blind eye toward stylistic continuity, either threshing out a new idea and discarding it after a few pictures, or else carrying it through 30 or 40 until she gets it "right." She is neither more nor less independent than most artists, but she is certainly less inclined to distraction. Her working method has always combined flurries of activity with prolonged moments of contemplation. For a long time, she looked toward Motherwell as the most dramatic interpreter of both shape and light values in abstract painting. Any residual influence is difficult to trace in Purcell's current work, however: Motherwell usually treats figure-ground relationships as an exercise in dialectics, whereas Purcell prefers to bring both planes closer together. The space in her best paintings always hovers at midpoint between atmospheric spatiality and shallow depth where masses are suspended against each other.

Purcell still considers her current work "formative," but then she is also the kind of artist who is always approaching painting as a process of learning. In some ways, it is to her benefit that the world is not racing to canonize any abstract painters right now, even those who have adapted gestural drawing to their own uses. She has used the last three or four years to great advantage, learning that releasing the guidance of her paintings to her instincts can also lead to a superior method of controlling them. She has also discovered that intensifying the personal edge of her work lends it both a more universal intelligibility and an increased formal power. She has only recently developed from a gifted but promising painter to a matured artist with much to say to the world. Ann Purcell's future can be determined less by the changes in the winds of fortune than by her continued determination to paint the truth of her own experience. (Group Gallery, Provincetown, August 13-17)

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