

# Pat Adams

by April Kingsley

Immersing oneself in one of Pat Adams' paintings is a richly complex optical, tactile, and kinesthetic experience. She is a miniaturist at heart, condensing vast territories into microcosms for you to explore. She gives you parts, rarely whole entities, and you must fill them out imaginatively in all dimensions. You weigh densities and readjust focus from area to area while your eye is repeatedly being led out of the field only to be caught again by some exquisite detail you'd failed to notice before and brought back inside. The artist said it very well herself some years ago when she wrote, "One stares into these paintings as into a face one loves, watching close up intently details at unaccustomed range, so close as to nearly mix, merge, and beyond the intimacy to wonder how it holds, by what one is held."

Pat Adams has been painting for forty years; she started when she was eight years old. After her B.A. at Berkeley she took up residence in Florence for a few years, and by 1956 she'd been in New York long enough to have her first one-person exhibition at the Zabriskie Gallery, where she's been showing regularly ever since. She's had two marriages, raised two children, and has held down a full-time teaching job at Bennington in Vermont where she's been living since 1964. In all her many years of active involvement as a painter, she's never been part of a movement or group, never received much critical attention, and has never been at the forefront of the art scene. Why? Her work has evolved slowly with no great leaps or major

## Microcosms for Contemplating the Universe



Pat Adams, *Sun and Beginnings*, 1960. 4x10". Destroyed.

changes for critics to grab onto. She's always been sort of an outsider, it's true, and she's had a lot of non-art concerns draining her energies. But I think the basic reason is the intense intimacy of her painting style. Paul Klee and Mark Tobey, each in his different way, shared her problem. One might, of course, blame the situation on the plight of the "feminine style" (if there is such a definable thing) being invisible to eyes trained in looking at male art and therefore going unappreciated. I don't, though, see it that way.

Though her paintings are often small, opulently, obviously beautiful, and perfectly legible, they are difficult. They resist intellectual comprehension and demand instead a physical and emotional involvement on the part of the viewer. Her motifs imply specificity but are actually coded formal messages that successfully elude deciphering. A device in the Lindesfarne Gospels or an Islamic tile may have triggered her mind originally, but by the time she's distilled it and transformed it into her own property

we can no longer recognize it. We can only sense it allusively, the way you sense a woman's been in the room after she's gone by the faint scent of her perfume left lingering in the air.

Her influences have been many and varied, from nature to the Book of Kells--wave patterns in sand, splatters of rain drops on a dry surface, plain stones and variegated-color rocks, crystals, milk-weed seeds, connective tissue, rainbows, the edge of the sea on a moonlit night, sand dunes, constellations of myriad stars. She has studied pre-historic rock engravings, Irish illuminated manuscripts, Persian miniatures, architecture and scripts, and Jackson Pollock for ideas about line. She may find inspiration for the all-over, jewelled spotting of her surface in Seurat as much as in Flemish painting (Bosch and Breughel in particular), but her sumptuous color seems to be equally at home in the worlds of Rothko, Turner, Renoir and mid-sixties Olitski. Recent emphasis on geometry can be traced to her interest in Burgoyne Diller, Stuart Davis and Suprematism in the same generalized way that the halo-effects in her early work can be attributed to her involvement with Arthur Dove's paintings.

*Intention's Eye* of 1956 is fairly typical of her early mid-fifties style. In it, soft globules of color shuffle across the canvas enveloped in thick atmospheric haze. The forms in the early work remind one of lights in a heavy fog, cellular tissue, or micro-organisms viewed through a microscope. Weights and transparencies were subtly adjusted for maximum ambiguity. As the fifties progressed, her edges hardened and the backgrounds, or the interstices between forms, began to be



Pat Adams, *Surface to Occupy*, 1966. Gouache, 8 3/8x17".

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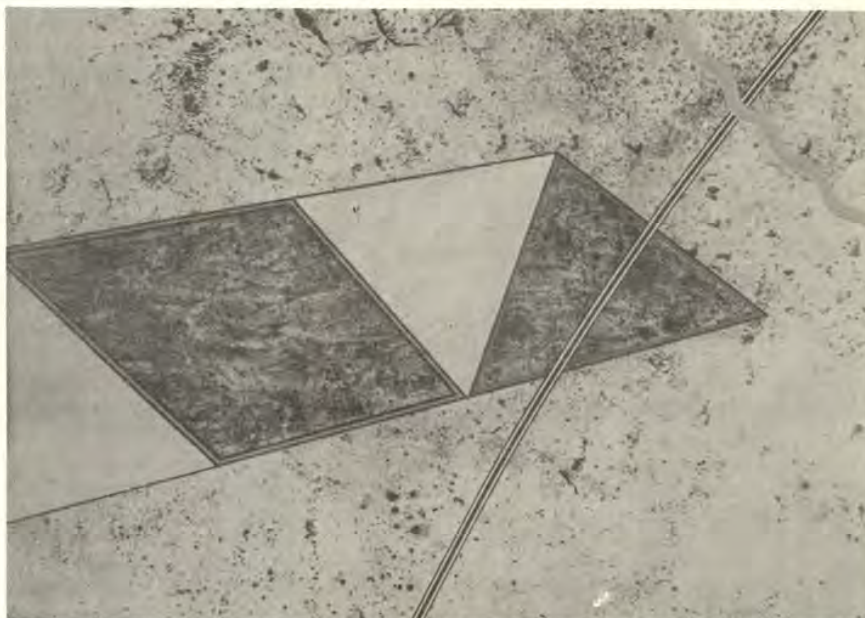
more gesturally articulated. This created more of an all-over situation which was usually halted short of at least one side by an edge of some sort, setting as a plane. (Jules Olitski's corners are a somewhat similar device.)

During the early sixties in paintings like *Sun and Beginnings* (1960), a few globular units were selected for enlargement and emphasis. The feeling is that we're looking at the same forms as before but under a higher-power microscope. The linear activity of the interstices became stronger in direction and rhythmic flow, cutting now completely across the field. A few years later a single furry circular form might predominate. She developed a way of working with monoprinting techniques to achieve greater distance from the image. By 1965 the softness of these watery-looking surfaces began to be decisively cut by the sharp outlines of forms that resembled geodes seen in section. Only parts of a section, though, for by now we seem to have zoomed in so closely to the subject/object that we nearly lose sight of its *gestalt*. We have begun to have to complete the shapes in our minds' eyes.

In the late sixties the object is gone. Lines pass through, implying they are the edges of things, but neither color nor texture gives a clue to what those things might be. Sometimes scalloping, arches, or uprights create the impression that the inspiration was architectural; sometimes the patterns of the various textures imply something organic, but we cannot be sure. *Surface to Occupy* (1966), as the title suggests, is a place for us to fill with ideas of our own--the edge of the earth as seen from the moon, a tree trunk in section, fields cut by a two-lane highway, the edge of the sea, perhaps.

At this point Adams had a wide range of techniques at her disposal for getting pigment down automatically, yet with a clear precise look to it. She utilizes many different media--acrylic, gouache, watercolor, pencil, ball-point pen--and layers them in a given work. She began to manipulate focus more and more deliberately so that the eye had to adjust, as if to real distances, when crossing boundaries between areas. The bands comprising those crossover points began to take on the character of planes or objects with their own focus or location in space.

Linear activity in the early seventies was either ornamental, calligraphic, geometric, or a combination. It was read against a dense, amorphous ground. Even when there were strong vertical accents to give a painting a sense of orientation to the wall, there was still a dizzying, gyroscopic effect. To get an idea of what I mean, think of spinning around in place somewhere inside the Alhambra while staring at a single decorative floor tile or at a spot where a multi-lobed (scalloped) archway cuts out an area of mosaiced wall behind it or the pierced stonework of the dome above.



Pat Adams, *Rose*, 1976. Gouache and mixed media. 14x15 3/4".

Pat Adams' working method is accretive. She will work on 20 or more small paintings on paper over a period of one or two years. Starting perhaps with a few scribbles or geometric doodlings, a few blots or washes of watered-down acrylic, rubbings or a monoprint-type of non-handmade looking pictorial element, she explores what she's got, picking out implied geometries, outlining planes, adding layers of color to cover some areas and stress others. She seems to work from all sides with a peripheral vision that scatters or spins out from the center. She'll echo a geometric shape in a calligraphic facsimile, then perhaps, echo it again softly in a vague, cloudy passage in the colored ground. In *Sweet Lowering* (1976), for example, one side of the triangular unit moving in from (or off and out of) the left is paralleled by the strongest linear element in the picture, a multiple-stripe band running straight across the picture from lower left to upper

middle right. Below its juncture with the left edge, three kinds of lines spring forth. A blue-edged wavy white line arcs like a stretched spring all the way to the top edge. It passes beneath a taut yellow line moving right, and a supple bit of looped calligraphy in red and white heading in the same direction. But it passes over the strong diagonal, pushing it back in space. All this happens on a warm white surface speckled unevenly with blottings of red, blue and brown that looks like an aerial view of sparse desert topography.

Adams usually incorporates the ground itself, or a color or texture similar to the ground within her bands, thereby canceling their absolute readings as figure on ground. The device parallels figure-ground alternations in oriental rugs and decoration. She tends to link most of her forms to an edge, as if for support, but also to indicate their theoretical extension outside the limits of the picture in the Neo-plastic manner. A marvellous natural colorist, she establishes a strong hue to hold the field together as a plane and then plays brilliantly colored lines or incident against it to make it vibrate optically. Though a few of her new paintings have open, whitish or pale grounds, most of her work is still characterized by rich, densely-packed surfaces that seem worked up in many layers. *For the Moment* is the brightest-colored new painting, with its saturated turquoise ground contrasting with the warm dark brown and blue blobs in the lower half. (This particular painting is unusual in the context of the rest of the new work because it contains these large furry-edged forms reminiscent of earlier work.) The device used here, of swinging the outermost band of a right-angle unit off to become an autonomous line going its own way, is a recurrent one in many of the new paintings.



Pat Adams, *Some Comes Later*, 1975. Gouache, 18 5/8x15 3/4". All photos courtesy Zabriskie Gallery.

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waterfalls which recall the romantic, pastoral works of the nineteenth century Hudson River school. The artist focuses on rugged motifs, but the mood they evoke is gentle and benevolent. In contrast to this idyllic calm, the atmosphere in the ambitious compositions that incorporate archetypal figures—for example, *Earth, Air, Water* (1976)—is more dramatic and harsher. The mythical nudes may seem stiff and unnatural in these landscape settings where soft outdoor light and warm tones have yielded to stronger studio contrasts. Sklarski's characteristically fine, controlled draftsmanship is preeminent throughout the show, which includes works dating from 1969 to the present. In addition to the extensive timeless landscapes, there are very careful and accurate plant studies and two sanguine figure drawings, as well as several small oil sketches. The latter are pastel-like sky studies executed in a looser and softer technique.

—Judith Tannenbaum

### Helen Quat

(Alonzo Gallery, Mar. 9-Apr. 3) The first one-woman exhibition of Helen Quat's work in Manhattan reveals this artist's polished draughtsmanship and technical virtuosity within the etching medium. Her method is color viscosity, a means, she explains in her demonstrations, by which intaglio and surface colors can be printed on one plate and in a single printing without blending. The results achieved by her skillful manipulation of color and surface on the deftly-worked plate are rather stunning and almost science-fiction like evocations of the metamorphosis of organic forms—rocks, shells, coral glide and roll in space like luminaries on an astral plane. These are in part derived from such natural objects which she brings to the surface during scuba diving excursions on vacation.

In a surreal vein, she is obsessed with the swirling motion of a large flower-coral form which seems affected by wind, water, fire in its nomadic wanderings. Her imagery is suggestive of the associations of many levels of nature from the flight of a bird to intimate parts of feminine anatomy. Titles such as *Cosmic Encounter*, *Fire Dance*, *Peaks and Valleys* conjure up such symbolic overtones which accord well with her complex working of the etching medium.

Although the etchings are the most inventive and successful, the show also includes a number of delicate and accomplished silverpoint drawings rendered with great finesse. Paintings continue similar imagery; the tondos are strikingly like planetarium views of the twisted surface of some strange planet. But they are rather more of an extension

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outweigh these disadvantages. The gallery's pursuit of self-criticism and quality work was generally praised, as was the sense of SoHo 20 as a source of information with which other shows and projects could be obtained. In addition, many expressed, in one way or another, a feeling of self-confidence achieved by running an art gallery for and by themselves, one of the aims of the founders.

After reading the questionnaire responses, one feels that many of these women "came out" into the art world with SoHo 20. As exhibiting members of a New York gallery, their attitudes and careers seem to have taken on new definitions and goals, as if the rigors and realities of their memberships have made them aware of what they are able to do, as artists and as women. Over the past three years, I have watched the gallery as a whole improve in physical appearance and in functioning. More importantly, I have seen the work of the individual members undergo changes which have almost always been for the better. I have seen styles change, compositions tighten, ideas clarified in the work of most, if not all, of the artists. It is a gratifying, wonderful aesthetic experience to watch "young" artists develop and progress with the gallery.

The detailing of the SoHo 20 experience by its members leads me to conclude that women's cooperatives are vitally needed, as both alternatives to the male-dominated commercial gallery system, and as sources of communication and support for women "out of the mainstream" who require exposure and education in order to establish themselves in the art world. SoHo 20 has served, and continues to serve, these functions, providing a strong image to follow, and showing the art world that one need not be a victim of the system in order to be successful within it.

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than a primary concern so far. For the present, it is her astuteness in the print shop which stands out.

—Barbara Cavaliere

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*According to the Day* is a smashing little painting. A blue/gray ground, that looks a bit like marbled end papers, is interrupted by a red scalloped right angle, a brilliant rainbow of green, yellow and blue bands, and a solid triangular slab of pinkish tan cutting off the left side. Beneath this element is another corner device filled with small geometric forms in brilliant colors. (These right angles remind me of picture frame samples the framer puts around the corners of a picture to see what it will look like.) Shiny spots sparkle unevenly over the whole surface. The increasing size, firmness, and unitary quality of her geometric shapes is epitomized by *Rose* with its huge plane of connected triangles and a rhombus. She floats complete squares, circle segments, rectangles, and triangles with less and less temerity all the time. Her lines seem tauter, more like spring steel, less malleable and calligraphic over all.

The recent emphasis on the geometric brings a new clarity to Adams' content. It's a break with the more hermetic attitude that seemed to dominate before. The new paintings look less like enlarged details and more like enormities contracted to manageable size. They have so much built-in scale and formality they could be any size. She has always known that she needed to keep the handmade look out of her pictures to separate them from the beautifully designed, well crafted appearance of manuscript illumination or Oriental miniatures. That's why she developed her arsenal of automatic techniques for applying paint. On the other hand, she has studiously avoided the gesture or the calligraphic line as a "seismograph of the soul" the way Mark Tobey used it, for instance. She's not interested in the obsessive repeat, the tiny mark or the emotional line. She gives even her looping lines, the most easy-going part of any of her paintings, the snap of being intended and of having some definite place to go. Their meanderings never seem purposeless or accidental, but carefully planned instead.

It is a narrow path she treads between these two essentially contradictory modes. A similar duality occurs in her surfaces, which she wants to be supple and malleable but not soft or penetrable. She needs to make them exert maximal optical and haptic pressure (to feel full) without becoming closed or jewel-like. It is a desire for the deeply intimate experience of miniature painting without its smallness of ambition. As she says, "What I want for most of my work is a ranging accuracy, yet a locus where everything is brought to bear; it has to do with a close hugging of the contour of reality. And by reality I mean a very complex experiential density. Painting, then, is my report on that reality."