



Warlock Davies

Kenneth Noland's *Lapse*

But What Does It Mean?

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Kenneth Noland
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Normally one hears that question from the uninitiated over and over again in any large exhibition of modern abstract painting. A funny thing happened to me as I meandered down the ramps of the Guggenheim viewing the Noland show, which was that I found *myself* thinking it instead. The visitors, numerous since it was the free night, seemed to have no trouble accepting the work. "Oh! I like that one." "Aren't those colors beautiful?" "What luscious pinks!" "Even my mother would like that one." And so on.

Of course the color *is* beautiful. It is seductively soft, tastefully co-ordinated, and rarely challenging. Except for the recent paintings, which are by far his best to date, there are almost no jarring color chords, no combinations that set your teeth on edge, no striking dissonances. It is all accessible and appealing, and easy going. But what does it mean?

Robert Motherwell once wrote, that

"The pure red of which certain abstractionists speak does not exist no matter how one shifts its physical contexts. Any red is rooted in blood, glass, wine, hunters' caps, and a thousand other concrete phenomena. Otherwise we should have no feeling toward red or its relations, and it would be useless as an artistic element."

Kenneth Noland uses red often, and a lot of black and white with all their special connotations, plus blue and yellow and green with theirs. But none of his colors seem to be particularly resonant emotionally. The black seems to vitiate the blue, the yellow to pale the red, the white to mitigate the green and all to cancel out the effectiveness of all. The colors aren't muddy and they are usually applied in wide enough expanses to read separately, except for the striped paintings. The reason he gets this peculiarly neutral result, I suspect, lies in his drawing, his compositions. They are all about movement, and they literally move the eye in and out, across and out of the canvas so swiftly and unswervingly that one is unable to focus on any one hue and absorb it in all its full potential.

The early full-field chevrons, the lozenges, and the new eccentric configura-

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tions are the paintings I find work best coloristically, though I like the vigor of the first wave of target paintings a lot. These were the subject of a fine exhibition at the School of Visual Arts gallery in 1975, organized by Jeanne Siegel where their variety and high-spiritedness was displayed to better advantage than in the current selection, and installation.

I had expected the Guggenheim show to be something of a disaster in the relentless curvilinearity of the Guggenheim since all the work was conceived in and for rectilinear spaces (as all modern painting is), but, except for the striped paintings and the plaids, the paintings fared quite well in their eccentric spaces. The only fault I found with the show as a whole is that it doesn't include the transitional, the unsure, the early, the interesting, but less than perfect works that would have given some indication of his struggles and triumphs along the way. The catalog does — although in black and white — and the show would have been much more exciting if it had done so as well. An artist as

seemingly seamless and effortless as Noland could use a more revealing approach to his oeuvre. It is precisely the easiness Noland seems to have painting his paintings that is upsetting to me. Matisse struggled, and left you the traces of his difficulties, when he wrought those "armchair" type, resolved paintings.

Josef Albers, Noland's "father-teacher," seems as obsessed as Mondrian was with his image. Both were inverted expressionists. Yet, Noland's work doesn't have that kind of internal pressure. His most recent works feel closest to, albeit with their empty centers, felt, thought-out, expressive painting, as most of us have come to know it. In them he takes the most risks with color, with surface variegation, with 3D-2D ambiguity, with the surface tension of the picture plane, with external shape and its independence from interior forms, with, in short, many of the things that make paintings exciting and aesthetically satisfying. He seems to have liberated himself at last from reductivism and to be moving, like Frank Stella who he seems often to be paralleling in a less intellectual, but more accessible way, onto a plateau of picture-making where more is better than less is. ●