

IN THE GALLERIES

An artist's inventiveness, through 2 different styles

BY MARK JENKINS

Many of the artworks in “Chicago/Washington,” the John Alexander Steele retrospective at Fred Schnider Gallery, were made in one of the two cities in the show's title. Yet both of the very different styles on display appear more European than American. Steele moved to Washington in 1958, lived here until his 2017 death and was reportedly influenced by such Washington colorists as Kenneth Noland and Howard Mehring. The only artist after whom Steele titled one of these pictures, however, is Russo-French modernist Wassily Kandinsky.

Steele was born near Chicago and attended that city's Art Institute, but spent much of his childhood in Scotland. In Washington, he was a respected art restorer whose own work embraced representational as well as abstract modes. This selection features a dozen bold color-field paintings from the second half of the 1960s, none of which appear closely aligned with the often gauzy pictures made by Noland, Mehring and their peers.

Steele's late-'60s style is hard-edge and geometric, with dramatic contrasts between bright colors and large expanses of white or black. The impact is immediate, but closer inspection reveals subtle twists, including seemingly white areas that are actually mottled in multiple hues and curved boundary lines in such Popsicle colors as pink and lime green. These touches energize European-style formalism with sparks of American Pop.

The show's other set of works, mostly from the late '50s or early '60s and shaped by a post-collegiate sojourn in rural Scotland, are very different. These smaller, textured painting-collages draw their imagery from nature and incorporate such 3-D materials as ash, sand and putty. The overwhelmingly earth-toned pictures don't have the kick of the later paintings. But a few of them — notably “Standing Owl” — attain a canny harmony of primal subject and primitivist style. They have an out-of-time quality that evokes rustic Britain more than either Chicago or Washington.

John Alexander Steele: Chicago/

Washington Through Aug. 21 at Fred Schnider Gallery, 888 N. Quincy St., Arlington. Open by appointment.

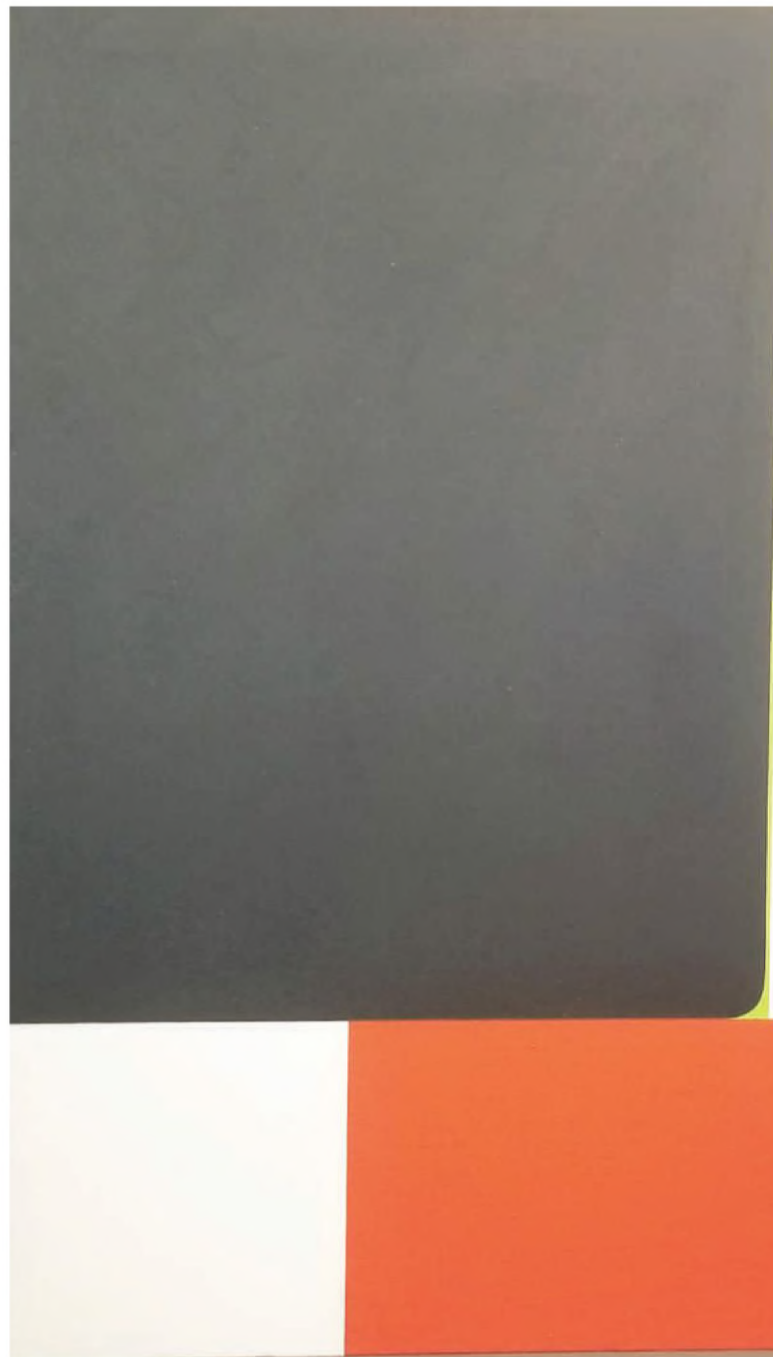
Colors of Confidence

Most of the pictures in “Colors of Confidence,” Pazo Fine Art's impressive mini-survey of late-20th-century D.C. abstraction, were made after 1970. But a few date from the period of John Alexander Steele's “Chicago/Washington” color-field paintings, and that's not the only overlap between the two shows. Pazo's selection includes several examples of Washington colorism at its most geometric.

Visitors are first greeted by the dark-toned “Magenta Double,” one of Mehring's paintings made of canvases dappled with a single hue and then cut and pasted into symmetrical arrays of multicolor blocks and bars. Also on exhibit are three Thomas Downing paintings, one of which has never been shown publicly, of dots in contrasting tints. The rounds are stained into raw canvas in the usual Washington-colorist manner, but plotted in tidy patterns. Only slightly looser is a Paul Reed painting whose circular layout of lavender petals is framed by hot-colored, regularly shaped triangles. (Reed, longest-lived of the show's eight artists, died in 2015.)

In the two more-complex Downing paintings, some of the dots are white, which accentuates the canvas's muted tan and sets off the circles of blue, green and shades of brown. White dots also pop from the orderly yet gently eccentric “Share,” a typically mesmerizing composition by Simon Gouverneur, one of two artists of color in the show. The other is Carroll Sockwell, whose gray-toned drawing suggests a meticulous rendering of a titled rectangle as seen through cracked glass. (Sockwell was a D.C. native, while Gouverneur spent just the last decade of his life here. Sadly, each committed suicide, just two years apart in the early '90s.)

Tom Green's 1997 “Sightings” (the most recent piece) and Jacob Kainen's 1972 “Secretary General” play soft color against sketchily defined shapes, to vastly different effects. The most fluid picture is Willem de Looper's untitled 1975 one,



John Alexander Steele's “Orange, Black, Green Accent” is hard-edge and geometric.



The “Sometimes, We Remember Our Bedrooms” installation incorporates playful chutes.

whose layered bands of tan and brown suggest water and earth at the same time. The Dutch-born D.C. painter's version of a stripe painting appears as primordial as it does modern.

Colors of Confidence Through Aug. 22 at Pazo Fine Art, 4228 Howard Ave., Kensington. Open by appointment.

Ikard and Gamma

For a child, everyday furniture can serve as recreational equipment. To recapture the feeling of such bedroom romps, Luke Ikard builds bunk beds, both as models and at full scale, to which he attaches playground-style yellow enclosed chutes. These are the physical centerpieces of “Sometimes, We Remember Our Bedrooms,” Ikard's collaboration with Joshua Gamma at Hamiltonian Artists. The two artists are based in Baltimore but have roots elsewhere, which is particularly important to Gamma's contribution.

That is the show's soundtrack, drawn from mix tapes that Gamma made as a preteen in the 1990s after his family moved from Monterey, Calif., to Morgan City, La. (His father was in the Coast Guard.) The range of music, mostly recorded from radio broadcasts, is wide, but heavy on mid-'60s material.

“This was back when local radio truly was local radio,” Gamma said in an email. “And for better and worse, south-central Louisiana at the time was in some ways about 30 years behind the rest of the country.”

Although Gamma was initially alienated by his new home, he found much to like there — and in the songs he heard on oldies radio. “The Utopian idealism of the '60s was definitely appealing to me as a 12-year-old,” he noted.

Some of Gamma's actual tapes, with their exuberantly hand-lettered text, are placed on display atop stark white lozenges that hang in midair, suspended by chains that are the same yellow as the chutes. The contrast between handmade and machine-tooled is essential to the show. Ikard's work is clean and streamlined, a cross between minimalism and Danish Modern, while Gamma's is funky and one-of-a-kind. One artist constructs a pristine space; the other fills it with memories.

Luke Ikard with Joshua Gamma: Sometimes, We Remember Our Bedrooms Through Aug. 21 at Hamiltonian Artists, 1353 U St. NW. style@washpost.com

Up with the sun and a dark cloud over your head: Resenting your partner's job



Carolyn Hax

Hello Carolyn: My partner has leisurely mornings and gets to work sometime in the afternoon. When I ask, over supper, how the day was, I'm usually told about how BUSY it

was and the three or four tasks completed in the four to five hours he worked.

I am up at 5, manage several people and a retail shop, clock overtime every week and more.

Is there a respectful way to respond to a self-described busy day? I have, thus far, tried to ask for more details while pushing down my incredulity, because he clearly believes his own press.

—M.

M.: What I do is way harder than managing a shop.

Actually I doubt it is. Sucked to read that, though, didn't it?

You are asking a question, and your partner is giving you his answer.

If you're unimpressed by it, then ask a different question — or say out loud that you're feeling skeptical or competitive or resentful or believe his entitlement meter is off. Say why, with supporting examples. Even a hard truth is better than mentally eye-rolling or “pushing down” stuff as you feign interest in his day.

And you're not interested that way, not anymore: To my eye, you're far down the path from caring about his day to comparing experiences to looking to fuel your umbrage. You can get all that from Twitter.

Contempt, per the Gottman Institute, is “the most destructive negative behavior in relationships.” So face yours head-on.

If you don't respect him, then it's time not to be partners.

If you don't feel seen or respected by him, then it's time to say so and weigh his response.

If you don't feel your workload as a couple is shared equitably, then it's time to renegotiate it to reflect your workdays.

And if you aren't happy with getting up at 5 and working overtime to manage people, then it's time to rethink your own vocation instead of sniping at someone else's.

If you *do* like your work — if it suits you — then does his exertion relative to yours matter? Again — if there's something real here, say it.

Last thing. One, 5, 11 hours of work can all be “busy” — and also valuable, significant, mentally/physically/emotionally/creatively taxing, or whatever else — within the bounds of a given “shift.” And, the number of tasks is hollow information without all the supporting details about the nature of the tasks, the person doing them, or the conditions he's doing them in. So, again, ask yourself why you're so incensed at this straw man, and then ask



NICK GALIFIANAKIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

yourself how that anger relates to the real man across the table from you every night. That's the “respectful way to respond.”

Hello, Carolyn: The pandemic has really altered my perceptions and feelings on a wide variety of topics. Bluntly put: I would prefer to telework permanently to avoid being exposed to dangerous situations or irrational, human lack of concern for my health and well-being. I don't care if it's antivaxxers, QAnon types, or people who just “don't want to” wear masks or get vaccinated — if I have to work with people like that, I'd rather not ever do it face-to-face again.

I am likely to have to go back to the office. I actually enjoy the work — but all the office politics and dramas are not something I will ever tolerate or indulge again; it all feels so petty and like such a waste of time now. I really do not want any sort of relationship with co-workers any

longer, beyond basic civility in order to get our work done. How do I accomplish that?

—G.

G.: I can't argue with you about one thing: The pandemic finished the job social media started, of making an airtight case that we really, really, really don't want to know everyone's innermost thoughts. Or gobsmacking lack thereof.

So I'm sympathetic. But I don't think withdrawing forever, amen, is the answer. Living among other humans has always involved dangerous exposures to irrational people, because we're dangerous and irrational. Look at history, for fox's sake — if you can without averting your eyes. Look what we've done to each other, to ourselves. Look what we've done to the Earth. It's hardly just recent and not just “people like that.”

Yet we also need and, paradoxically, civilize each other.

Maybe polite distance from your colleagues is wise *for now*; you're anxious and justifiably burned out. (Maybe a health evaluation, too — many of us can't just drop the pandemic emotional weight.) The “how” of office de-socializing mostly takes care of itself, too: Be kind, be cooperative, do your job and politely decline to socialize. “No” — or, “I have other plans,” if monosyllables stick in your throat — “but thank you for asking.”

Eventually, though, as you heal from this awful year-plus, you might consider sampling various forms of mass forgiveness so you can venture back out there with the rest of us jackals. Humanity marches on, and even gets a few things right.

Write to Carolyn Hax at tellme@washpost.com. Get her column delivered to your inbox each morning at <http://wapo.st/gethax>.

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