

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

Charles Burwell, *Continuum*

Charles Burwell's paintings are dynamic and elegant abstractions which he builds laboriously by layering oil paint onto tightly stretched canvas supports. His work derives from a sophisticated understanding of picture making, and although Burwell is a tactile artist with formal design at the fore of his thinking, he is ultimately an intellectual artist. His intelligence is ever present and clearly visible in his images. While his earliest artistic influences were Cy Twombly, Mark Tobey, Agnes Martin, and Jack Tworkov, Burwell's newer work reflects a responsiveness to computer imagery and graphic work, especially Pop-like cartoon imagery. This mixture of the graphic and the elegant produces a tension that is purposefully never resolved.

Burwell's recent paintings also contain elements that have remained consistent in his work over time. Both his employment of the linear mark and his layering process—which relies on the interaction of a controlled dripped line with maze-like linear forms and organic and geometric forms—have been a part of his vocabulary for at least twenty years. Burwell constructs his paintings one stratum at a time, beginning with layers of drips that have a specific color structure. Observing his paintings is like working an archeological dig where varying depths of soil reveal a history of the site, both natural and cultural.

Burwell's work is not always completely abstract, however. His new body of prints, for instance, sometimes depend and elaborate upon images he has collected over the years. Burwell took an early interest in collecting images from pre-history, biology, archeology, and natural history, and he still sometimes refers to these biological diagrams and photos. He now builds files of digital images which he can pull up and review when desired. He is not only an obsessive image maker, but a compulsive image collector as well.

A studio visit revealed Burwell's collection of images which he has classified into systems. He builds these files with the same intensity with which he addresses his paintings, prints, and drawings, and it is this absolute concentration that makes his work powerful and which elevates it above decorativeness. He uses the computer to develop images in almost the same way that he makes paintings, and some of his recent works are produced in mixed media utilizing the digital process. Burwell finds that complexity, layering, patterning, and the wide range of imagery available through the computer make digital technology an asset in the studio. The more ambiguous and simplified forms in his recent works indirectly refer to connections he sees between biology, technology, and the complexities of an information-laden culture. This view of the world is shaped by living in an image-obsessed society informed by technology and consumerism. Burwell continues to look at the world from a point of view that he developed as young artist, but now has added new vocabulary which enriches his imagery. "Continuum" and "Continuation" are excellent descriptors of his career and vision.

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