

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

Odyssey of Abstract Art*

By Andrea K. Hammer, director of Artsphoria

Joe McAleer, an abstract artist featured at Bridgette Mayer Gallery in Philadelphia, has followed a nontraditional path. He began seeking representation after retiring from a "wonderful" 40-year teaching career.

"I always had work on an easel in the classroom and in my studio," he says. "I just did what I do now—except I rarely exhibited."

The artist, who divides his year painting in New Jersey and Southwest Florida studios, prefers the "odyssey" of creating abstract versus representational art. To describe these different approaches, he draws the vivid analogy of taking a cross-country trip.

"If I'm doing something realistic, it's like driving from Philadelphia to Los Angeles. I know how I'm going to get there. I'm going to go on the superhighway, straight across the country. I know exactly where I'm going. I have a roadmap in front of me. It's going to take me maybe two days to get there," he says.

"In creating abstract work, I just hop in my car and start driving West. After I'm driving for a while, I see an interesting side road. I take that road for a while. I see another road, and all of a sudden I take that.... The road I take is filled with dead ends and wonderful, spectacular views or discoveries in small towns, which I never would have found if I stayed on a straight highway. Eventually I end up in Los Angeles."

For example, McAleer notes that his optic diamond series emerged during a 2-year exploration with the "jumpsquare".

"I was looking for a way to add vibrant color to my jump paintings, and the montage process allows this. Montage images and color provide an immediate springboard for the painting," the artist says. "I let the colors 'dance' throughout the optic diamond with every stroke of the brush, creating original passages."

In addition, McAleer explains that the juxtaposition of an active color palette and black-and-white forms hold the work together visually.

"One moment, the viewers see a progressive set of steps and the next a series of wedgelike shapes. On further examination, the viewer sees vibrating color floating on top of black and white stripes from the simple jumpsquare."

During McAleer's exploratory process, he puts a painting aside if it presents a stumbling block.

"I let it 'simmer' for a while. I put it down and come back to it fresh. I leave some paintings that I'm unsure about in either Florida or New Jersey. Then, after being away from them, I see them entirely differently," he says. "It's amazing how when you come back, you know exactly what to do."

In addition, McAleer draws continual inspiration from the work of abstract expressionists who, in his opinion, freed the following generations of artists to explore and experiment with the painting process. He thinks that the abstract expressionists, working from

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the unconscious or imagination, redefined the creative act.

McAleer also finds renewal, as an artist, every time he reads the following quote by Harold Rosenberg:

"At a certain moment, the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyse or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter."

The work of Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Joan Mitchell, and others have also provided a strong influence in shaping his art. In particular, McAleer explains that these abstract expressionists have inspired him to seek his own vision.

"I always try to listen for my muse, no matter how softly she may be speaking," he says.

** This profile includes material from a Q&A with the artist and owner of the Bridgette Mayer Gallery during winter 2008.*