

## The Phenomenology of Light

By: Robin Rice, Art Writer

I was present when Elyce Abrams presented her MFA thesis paintings in remarkable circumstances. It was chilly in the improvised gallery, a vast windowless space “warmed” by a single kerosene heater. Coats and sweaters dealt with the chill but it was impossible to ignore the fact that the lights blinked out moments before Elyce’s thesis defense, the first of the day, was scheduled to begin. The degree candidates and their committees milled about in the gloom and eventually decided that final critiques must go forward. So, everyone gathered in the corner where the invisible paintings hung. Elyce seemed impressively unflappable and today recalls that she actually felt more relaxed talking about her work in the dark.

Someone found a flashlight. Elyce’s paintings seemed to blossom in the splayed beam. Unexpectedly, they were radiant and full of magic, almost as if they were meant to be seen in just this way. Soft bursts of illumination flowed from the panels with a beautiful sense of completeness. I do believe no other work there could have come near to Elyce’s success in that strange situation. I’ll never know for sure, though, because almost as soon as her paintings had been discussed, admired and approved, the lights suddenly came back on.

Even as she moves into new territories: larger supports, compositionally challenging shapes and site-specific installation, Elyce Abram’s work continues to capture a unique sense of light as a kind of pervasive energy. Often it seems reflected, stretched like headlights shimmering on wet pavement or momentarily dazzling like swaying sparkles on water. It is light divorced from shape-defining representation, the light of memory unfocused: jumbled as in the high drama of *Scorched* or dazed by movement, as in *Spin*.

Elyce Abram’s painting is distinguished by its relationship to the grid, an underlying structure that is generally regarded as implicit in visual art. The typical rectilinear shape of a painting indicates how basic the grid is. Perhaps knowledge of the horizon is one of the first things humans internalize because it’s the very ground on which we crawl and learn to stand. We build upon it and rest and, finally, die there. In this archetypal relationship, the vertical suggests the human figure or human architecture, defying yet relying on the gravity represented by the horizontal. It’s unusual to find paintings which detach verticality from an obvious reference to horizontality.

In Elyce’s work, alternating vertical divisions function like motifs in music. The rhythmic linear punctuation evokes an almost auditory sensation, but aside from that, I tend to associate her paintings with specific ordinary sounds: the mummer of distant traffic, the rustling freshness of grasses, the crackle and miniature explosions of fire.

Though they are without horizon, some paintings in this group are horizontal in form, a shape that seems scroll-like, part of an unfolding. Color and pattern relationships suggest an interweaving of past and present. We don’t know the beginning and cannot know the end but Elyce Abrams places us at the mysterious, indecipherable heart of the narrative.