

BRIDGETTE **MAYER** GALLERY

Distillation and Desire: The Dialectics of Charles Burwell's Abstractions

If you're a viewer that likes to divide abstraction into opposing camps, the gestural and the graphic, say, Charles Burwell's paintings slip easily into the latter designation, apropos of a temperament that is both utopian and leans toward an elegant, meticulously calibrated, labor-intensive refinement. Burwell's vision of abstraction emphasizes the linear and the syntactical, his imagery—based on templates he has created over the years—a personalized, evolving lexicon of forms taken from both nature and the man-made that is capable of infinite expansion, infinite riffs. His colors—whites, blacks, secondary and tertiary hues—are more analytical than unruly but nonetheless rich and maintain a forceful presence in synergy with line. Within that, oppositions that are crucial to his montages and ratchet up the tension include his transparent layerings of images and colors that are at times disparate, dissonant—grids, stripes, a rain of skinny, needle-sharp lines, quatrefoil and more organic shapes (are they schematized clouds? cloverleaves? petals? crystals?), loopy, circular, half-circular proliferating arabesques—as well as his preternatural sense of asymmetrical balance and disjunctive rhythms. His synthesis of the biomorphic and the geometric, the hand-drawn and the computer-generated is ultimately a comparison and reconciliation between the natural and the technological and a reference to the many systems that map and convey information today.

Usually executed in either oil or acrylic on canvas or panel, his paintings—which he says he "constructs" more than he paints and are increasingly stratified, "spatially complex," and "ambiguous" in terms of the source of his imagery—reflect a genealogy based in 1970s Pattern & Design with a hint of Op, the layouts of commercial art, the intricate, all-over tracteries of illuminated manuscripts, textiles, tapestries and wall paper, the cut-and-paste mode of the computer and artists such as Jack Tworkov and Agnes Martin. Burwell plays old against new, high against low, fine arts against the decorative, the fragment against the whole. The pay-off? Exhilarating paintings that possess flair and finesse and offer a fluid, capacious correlative to our ever more complex, multi-dimensional, interconnected world.

Lilly Wei

Lilly Wei is a New York-based independent curator, essayist and critic who writes for *Art in America* and is a contributing editor at *ARTnews*.