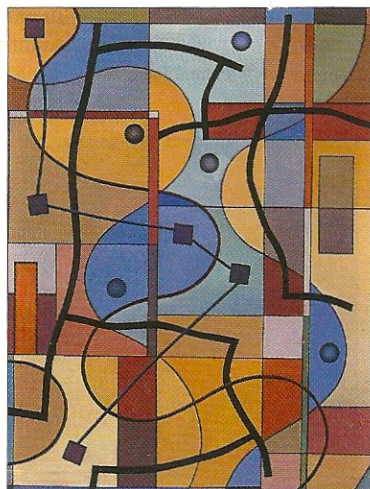


ARTnews

NATIONAL REVIEWS



William Conger,
Make-Believe, 2000,
oil on canvas,
90" x 70".
Roy Boyd.

William Conger

ROY BOYD

Chicago

With "New Paintings on the Theme of Childhood," venerable Chicago abstractionist William Conger continued to demonstrate a wondrous ability to explore fresh territory without taking a false step.

These self-assured works—ten oils on canvas and one on wood—carry forward the formal playfulness that marked his 1997–98 "Circus" paintings, but add a new delicacy and grace. Subtly modulated, indefinable hues evoke a faded harlequin costume; sinuous shapes break from pure geometry into the exuberant contours of a Matisse-like collage; slender, undulating lines connect dots and squares in circular and sidestepping games of tag across a giddy landscape.

Midwestern kin to the Bay Area school, Conger's abstraction is firmly rooted in the evocation of place. Earlier efforts drew inspiration from Chicago's urban and regional scenery, particularly the artist's beloved Lake Michigan, whose reflective waters reappeared here in moods from sunny to somber.

In this latest series, Conger again shifted locales, from the big top to the blacktop. Works such as

Spinner, *Bully*, *Recess*, and *Make-Believe* map a school-yard arena of secret codes, social territories, and psychological battlegrounds. Yet the dynamism of these large canvases—reined in by Conger's hard edges, muted palette, and uncanny sense of balance—never quite crosses into chaos. As in most child's play, what may first appear as anarchy to grown-up eyes represents instead a parallel order, with its own rules, rituals, and logic. In this place, the confusing conventions of adulthood are alternately tested, flouted, and reinforced, and patches of water and sky may prompt questions about our surroundings while offering the tantalizing promise of flight.

—Kristen Brooke Schleifer