

Art in America

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CHICAGO

William Conger at Roy Boyd

Like Richard Diebenkorn's "Ocean Park" paintings, William Conger's masterful abstractions are inextricably bound up with the physical and psychological



William Conger: *Lagoon*, 1996, oil on canvas, 49 inches square; at Roy Boyd.

experience of a particular place—Chicago, in this instance. Conger's titles—*Diversey*, *Fullerton*, *Webster Bridge*—refer to streets or structures familiar to him since boyhood, and anyone acquainted with Chicago will readily grasp these poetic evocations. *Cumberland*, for example, suggests the sprawling edge-city around O'Hare airport, where office towers and giant billboards punctuate a vast Midwestern sky. Conger creates an airy horizontal expanse in this large (ca. 6-by-10-foot) canvas, enlivening it with a screen of irregular vertical rectangles in red, yellow, pink, orange and blue. The effect is one of great vitality, capturing both the excitement of traffic and the visual clutter of crowded highway.

October (Chicago) is suitably autumnal in palette, with brilliant yellow, glowing orange and pink deployed across the painting in geometric shapes. Dazzling against the somber, brownish-gray background, these warm colors are more heartbreaking than gay, a last elegiac blaze before winter's long siege and occupation. Affect is essential to Conger's work; his paintings, while never narrative, are avowedly autobiographical, recording the continual emotional flux of both artist and city. It is Lake Michigan, always implicitly the background of these works, that Conger uses to reflect that flux, and in its shifting waters—jade green, pearl gray, azure—life's vicissitudes can be read again and again.

For Conger, this watery vista is an incomplete tranquility, a calm expanse always interrupted by a variety of incident closer to the picture plane. In previous works, palm fronds, lightning bolts and levitating rocks impinged upon this space; here floating rectangles and right-angles allude to canvas and picture frame, while strange lobed forms and celestial orbs add a sense of mystery. By allowing these foreground motifs, both metaphysical and vaguely erotic, to occlude our view of the distant lake, Conger seems to resist its seductive calm and promise of peace. Like Robert Frost's observer stopping by the woods, the artist considers a larger serenity without surrendering to it. Whether by choice or simple necessity he remains with the immediate, as yet too much of the world to do otherwise.

—Sue Taylor