
artcritical
the online magazine of art and ideas

CRITICISM ► EXHIBITIONS

Tuesday, October 21st, 2014

Beyond Image: William Conger of Chicago

by **Deven Golden**

William Conger at Studio Vendome Projects

September 18 – October 24 2014

(exhibition closed earlier than scheduled)

30 Grand Street (between Thompson Street and Sixth Avenue)

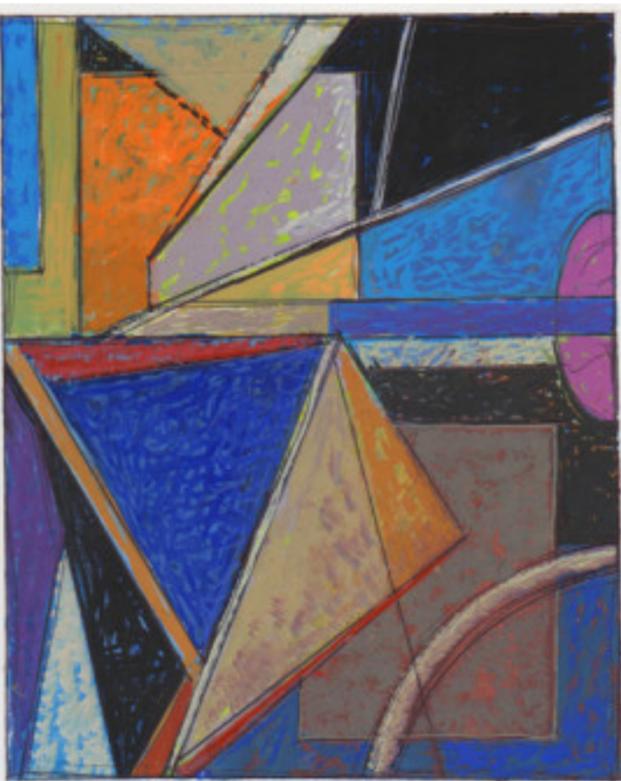
New York City, 646 650 2466



Installation shot of the exhibition under review with works by William Conger, both oil on canvas: left, *Dervish*, 2008, 54 x 60 inches, and *Dutchman*, 2011, 66 x 30 inches. Courtesy of Studio Vendome Projects

Before art magazines and the Internet flattened out the world and made us aware, perhaps overly so, of what artists everywhere were doing, artists developed their vision in dialogue with the place where they lived. As many know, Chicago had its own flavor of Pop Art in the 1960s and '70s: Imagism. Less well known are the many abstract artists there at the same time, engaged in loose but vital conversations with each other and other artists. Amongst them were Roland Ginzel, Thomas Kapsalis, Miyoko Ito, Richard Loving, and William Conger, whose recent works were recently on view in an exhibition organized by Saul Ostrow.

Simultaneously joyful and meditative, Conger's paintings eschew anything that could be called outright representational. Yet consistently, insistently, they present a clearly identifiable space, albeit one defined by extremely flat perspective. The paint, oil for the larger works and gouache for the smaller ones, is applied with small careful strokes in thin blended colors, which then gently add up to large undulating planes of muted color. These large areas are, in turn, bounded and intersected by thick lines that are similarly, if less expansively, multicolored. The resulting images are oddly organic, strangely familiar, and resonate with undeniable emotional undertones. Perhaps it is simply human nature to try and ascribe recognizable objects to forms no matter how abstract, but Conger's paintings elude the Rorschach test.



William Conger, #131, 2014. Gouache on paper, 5 x 4 inches.

Courtesy of Studio Vendome Projects

Take, for instance, one of the larger paintings in the exhibition, the wonderful *Dutchman* (2011). Blue and violet geometric shapes make up a ground on which yellow, orange, red rounded forms (mostly) overlay. Gray-black lines, reminiscent of vine charcoal stick, weave in and out, behind and in front. The verticality of the canvas pushes a figurative reading — for a brief moment one might think Mickey Mouse on Owsley Acid — while the rounding of the forms and opalescent color leans decidedly more to thoughts of landscape. If this sounds confounding or unsettling, in person this dichotomy is much more likely to engender a sense of calm reflection. A tangential but related experience might be found viewing medieval stained-glass windows: shards of colored glass held together with lead present highly fragmented images that nonetheless imbue an overall feeling of wholeness.

Distant echoes and subtle influences clearly remain in Conger's work from his early years in New Mexico looking at Raymond Jonson and other painters from the Transcendental Painting Group. Overall, however, Conger's late works highlight the particular qualities of Chicago's abstract style, favoring drawing and line over expressionistic brushwork resulting in there being more hand and less arm in the strokes. Imparting the impression of being a slower process, Chicago abstraction is less dependent on serendipity than its New York counterpart. There are exceptions, of course, and then one must also ask, if after 50 years as a major artist in Chicago, does Conger's work look like the Chicago style, or does the Chicago style look like Conger's work? A larger, more inclusive exhibition would be the way to find out.