

William Conger

The tendency of a number of present-day Chicago artists to utilize an apparently pure formal compositional structure to express intense emotional experience is at the center of William Conger's painterly concerns. In his darkly glowing canvases, there is an unusual tension between the intersections and overlays of curved and jagged forms with the deep and melancholy grandeur of the dark spaces they define. A further tensile balance in Conger's pictures is struck between the particular arrangement of shapes within the format of the canvas and the suggestion that these forms extend beyond the edges of the canvas as part of a wider realm of deep night filled with incandescent forms. These tensions and contrasts, along with the suggestions of skies or vast spaces, give Conger's work a cosmological twist. Yet, the forms he employs can also suggest the idea of parts of quite small things greatly magnified. His forms might be crystalline or other molecular structures as they appear magnified by an electron microscope. They also may resemble greatly enlarged details of minute biological structures. In this regard, Conger's work is connected to a long-time interest among Chicago artists of varied stylistic persuasions in the kind of form loosely called organic abstraction. Interest in this kind of form has waxed and waned among Chicago painters and sculptors for nearly two decades now, and Conger, along with Frank Piatek and Evelyn Statsinger, to mention just two artists in the present exhibition, has utilized this formal vocabulary with fascinating inventiveness and skill. Occasionally his forms approach a kind of rectilinear structuralism associated with geometric abstraction (*Eclipsis*, 1978). But the suggestion of regular geometry never quite becomes explicit: there is always a divagation into irregular shapes and departures from symmetry which, combined with the atmospheric effects of Conger's space, reasserts the mystery of the window-like composition. Conger's smoothly applied colors are ingeniously painted so that they seem to emanate lights of different hues from within the spaces of the paintings. These colors have a warmth and clarity that seems connected with terrestrial experience, making their occurrence in Conger's skies and night voids all the more unexpected and engrossing.

Checklist

height precedes width

1. *Eclipsis*, 1978
oil on canvas
66 × 60"
Collection Department of Art, Northern Illinois University,
Illinois Arts Council Permanent Purchase Grant
2. *Atala*, 1979
oil on linen
60 × 54"
Collection Misha and Sonia Zaks
3. *For November*, 1982
oil on canvas
60 × 54"
Collection Deeann Levy

Dennis Adrian
"Chicago - Some Other Traditions"
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