

ARTnews

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Chicago

WILLIAM CONGER

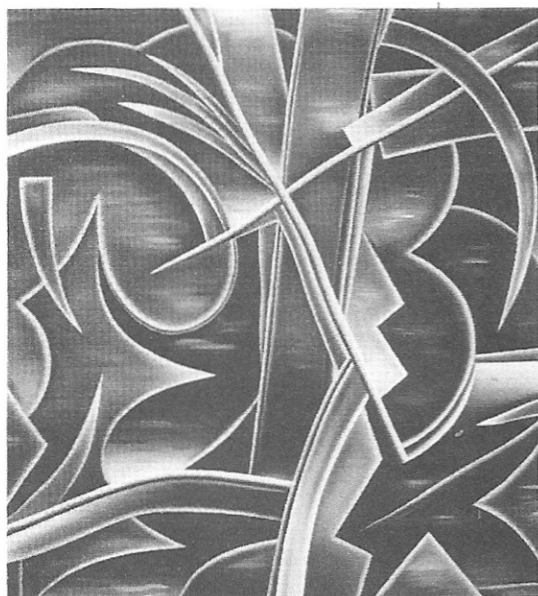
Roy Boyd

PERHAPS as much as any Chicago artist at present, Conger provides a curious amalgam of commitment to an abstract format with the Chicago predilection for interiorized narration. Straddling such polarized positions in a city like Chicago, which has been historically tough on abstraction and insistent on an indigenous painting style, has required some dexterity on Conger's part. The resulting hybrid is completely authentic, a kind of moralizing high-church abstraction spiked by the garish and titillating underside of life.

Conger takes most of his subjects from the Chicago landscape familiar to him from boyhood. There are some stylized references in these sleek paintings to vegetation and, particularly in his new work, to sunsets and to vistas of Lake Michigan. The pulsating colors, however, glowing with an eerie interior light, seem to be a response to the same Chicago spirit that has inspired the city's artists from Ivan Albright to the Imagists. In the end, the true subjects of these paintings are interior terrains with fragments of color-coded associations pieced together like luminescent puzzles or stained-glass windows.

The scaffolding for the color is typically an irregular maze of quasi-geometric, vaguely Art Deco forms that seem to float in loosely assigned positions instead of being locked into tight formations. The positions of the shapes are nonetheless firmly established in these highly controlled paintings whose archness is exaggerated by their quaint and craftsmanlike execution. Indeed, it is the decorous veneer that is most intriguing in its attempt to camouflage the work's earthier interests. That propriety also seems outdated in the 1980s, when impropriety is de rigueur, giving Conger's painting a kind of nostalgic charm all its own.

—Charlotte Moser



In works such as *Flora*, 1985, William Conger combines abstraction with an earthiness typical of Chicago art.