

art (cont.)

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST



William Conger

SOMEHOW OR ANOTHER THE PAINTINGS OF WILLIAM CONGER HAVE ALWAYS LEFT ME FEELING A LITTLE SAD OR MELANCHOLY—I'm not sure which, but I like that very much. I like that when I think I am supposed to dwell upon the art-historical influences and the context of an art world increasingly baffled by the relationship between the old and the new, the simple formal relationship between a red triangle and a delicately rendered passage of sky reminds me that, if nothing else, one of the great lessons of art history is that sometimes you have to remind yourself that looking at an artwork should be about just that: the pleasure of looking.

With a career spanning over five decades and a curriculum vitae that is humbling to all but the most seasoned of tenured professors, Conger's work represents the lifelong voyage of an artist in search of the mythic and epic potential of line, shape and color. It is unfair to say his vocabulary is raft with art-historical references—think Richard Diebenkorn meets Piet Mondrian—because the strong allegiance his work pays to the modernist camp is not accidental. Having studied with Elaine de Kooning in the 1950s and been-there-and-done-that long before most of us even picked up a book on the New York School, Conger is a painter living within a language, and not, as it were, merely strolling down memory lane.

To wit, the first time I viewed a painting by Mondrian I realized one thing: it is impossible to understand his work through color reproductions alone. On paper Mondrian appears flat, rigid and, most of all, perfect. In person, imperfections abound, paint cracks, and the images announce themselves as warm and inviting, certainly not the cold and lifeless trophies of a high-modernist style I was expecting. They are awfully charming, indeed, and although this may stink of pointing out the obvious, it is very much a part of how I have come to view the recent paintings of William Conger as a nod of the hat to both sides of the conundrum. (Steven Wirth)

"Recent Paintings" shows at Roy Boyd Gallery, 739 North Wells, (312)642-1606, through April 10.