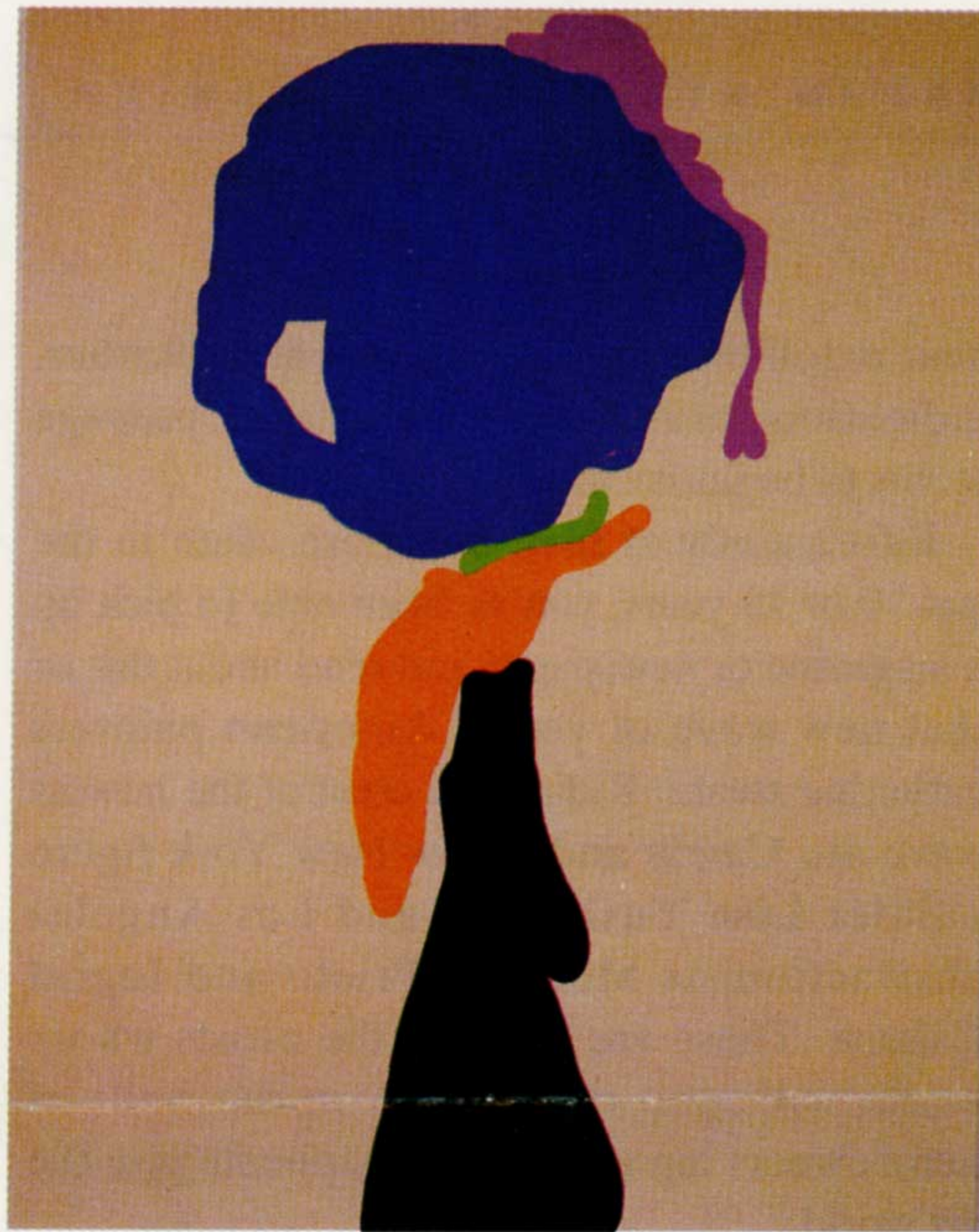
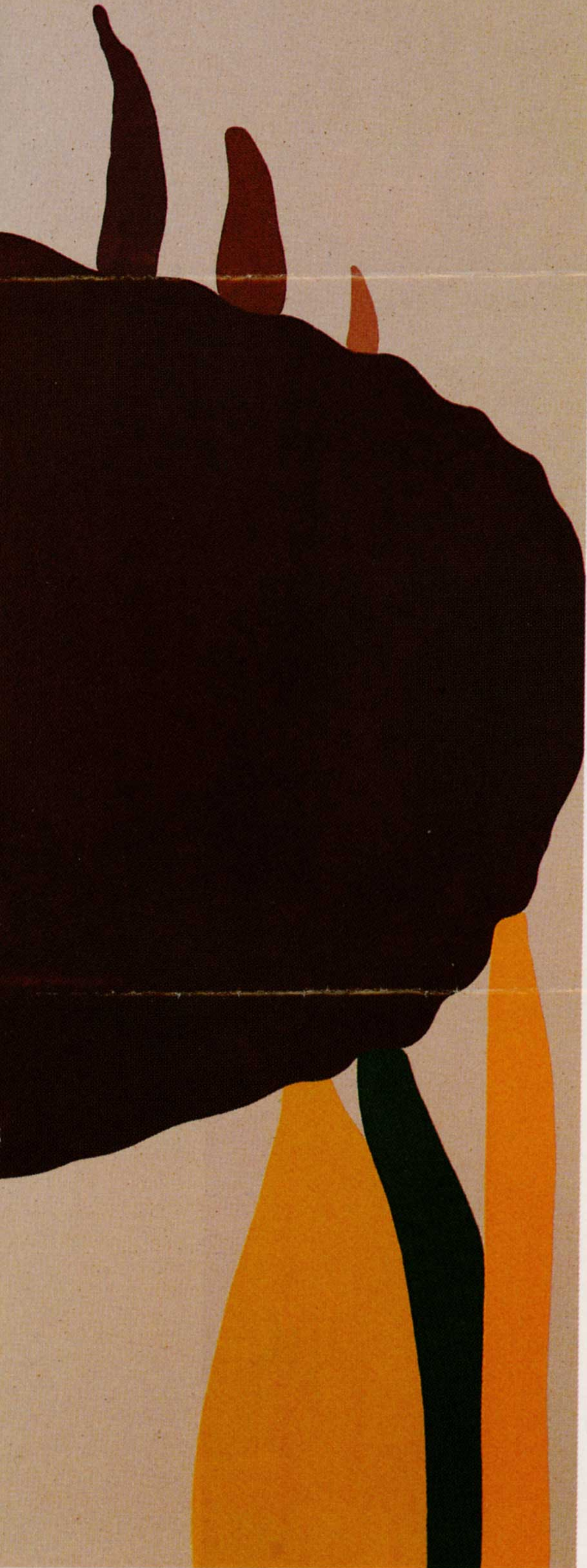


Brush Strokes of Genius

Painting is popular again, thanks in part to some young artists whose canvases recall the 1960s style blamed for its so-called demise.

BY CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT

The shapes and colors are anything but random in Monique Prieto's *Fancy That* (below), a 60-by-72-inch acrylic on canvas, and *GOP* (right), an 84-by-66-inch acrylic on canvas. Prieto uses a computer program to design studies for her paintings and determine color combinations.



GOP PHOTO BY ROBERT WEDEMEYER

We're in the middle of a painting renaissance. In the last year, a rash of magazines have published cover articles on the subject of painting's return, from the leading American art trade journal, *Artforum*, to the leading international journal, *Flash Art*. Even *New York* magazine dedicated eight pages in January to the arrival of what it called "The Mod Squad"—eclectic young Manhattan painters John Currin, Cecily Brown, Wayne Gonzales, Inka Essenhigh, and Damian Loeb.

The last painting revival came in the 1980s, when the high-flying, big-money, heavily market-oriented art scene was fueled by claims for painting as a robust international phenomenon. As evidence, art critics pointed not only to Julian Schnabel, David Salle, and Jean-Michel Basquiat in the United States, but also to Germans Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer and Italians Francesco Clemente and Sandro Chia.

There is, of course, a rarely mentioned hitch in all this hype. Painting can't really be "back" today because it never actually left. Individual painters have been hard at work in their studios all along, and any number of them have established important and influential careers.

What seems to be happening now is that painting is on the art-world radar screen in ways it hasn't been for a very long time. And it's not just getting attention as part of a cyclical—or cynical—effort to concoct some public relations

heat extolling newness and nowness. Rather, indications are that a generational passage seems to be under way.

Infrequently at first, but more often in the last 10 or 15 years, you've been able to pick up a magazine or newspaper and read about this or that new wave of young American painters gathering steam. Riding the crest of the newest wave are Currin and fellow New York figure painter Lisa Yuskavage and Los Angeles abstractionists Monique Prieto and Ingrid Calame. These are some of the artists whose works will soon be hanging on the walls of homeowners hip to the latest happenings in the art world.

Not-so-free hand

The art of Prieto and Calame has something important to say about the resurgent interest in painting, because their work is linked to the 1960s painting style that was blamed for the art form's demise. Their canvases recall the color-fields of the '60s, abstract paintings in which color is emphasized.



In Good Evening, Hamass (above), a 42-by-45½-inch oil on linen, and Big Little Laura (below), a 76-by-96-inch oil on canvas, Lisa Yuskavage doesn't separate her figures from their backgrounds. Instead, she lets one dissolve into the other.





Prieto's paintings are composed of clustered balloonlike shapes of bright, flat color painted directly on raw canvas. Using a computer program to "draw" studies for her paintings and calculate precise color combinations, she charts in advance every seemingly random drip and dribble. When the study is complete, Prieto transfers it to canvas by hand, using extreme care to keep every edge sharp and every color consistent and flat, rejecting all illusions of depth and removing any trace of her individual hand.

Similarly, Calame does not invent her abstractions freehand. Although her compositions appear to be loose, gestural, and improvised, they are not. She lays down large sheets of translucent paper and traces over the random patterns of stains she finds on the pavement in urban alleys, parking lots, and driveways. These "found stains" become the templates for Calame's finished paintings.

Neither Prieto nor Calame is interested in abstraction as an outward sign of the inner life of the artist. Their paintings instead recall the brightly pigmented, flowing rivulets of poured color in the work of Morris Louis and the fields of watery color sponged on raw canvas that were pioneered by Louis' mentor, Helen Frankenthaler.

Louis and Frankenthaler were two of the anchors in the biggest and most important exhibition of color-field painting, organized in 1964 by the influential critic Clement Greenberg for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. *Post-Painterly Abstraction*, as the show was titled, was partly meant as a high-powered rebuke of the pop and minimalist art then just beginning to move into the foreground. It didn't work. The subsequent so-called death of painting has been laid at the feet of color-field ever since.

Children of the Revolution

While the color-field-inspired work of Prieto and Calame may be helping to revive interest in painting in the 1990s, color-field itself wasn't entirely responsible for painting's declared death in the 1960s. It just couldn't sustain painting as a popular art form.

Painting in general became passé when the explosive rush of performance-oriented happenings, mass media-inspired pop, carefully tooled minimalist sculpture, ephemeral conceptual art, and other nontraditional forms collectively stormed the American art world. Painting was dismissed by some as old-fashioned and out of touch with a rapidly emerging high-tech world. Others regarded painting as a politically indefensible relic of the age of empires and colonial expansion.

Inevitably, the pointed revival of color-field by Prieto and Calame brings to mind the battle over the validity of painting that engulfed the American art world 30 years ago. The era we casually call "the '60s" is a period that actually began with the Kennedy assassination in 1963, started to wind down with the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam in 1973, and came to a traumatic close with the Watergate scandal in 1974. In the '60s, the overthrow of painting as the most respected vehicle for art was a bellwether for the larger cultural revolt that challenged Establishment values at every turn.

Now painters such as Prieto and Calame and Yuskavage and Currin are challenging the art world establishment, though Yuskavage and Currin are doing it quite differently than Prieto and Calame. They revive a classic subject in Western art: the female nude. However, neither revives it in an ordinary or expected way.

Nudes Now and Then

Like Prieto and Calame, Yuskavage deliberately invokes the long-impooverished tradition of color-field painting. Her nudes are painted as

wet puddles of soft, eye-candy color, of dusty pink sliding into warm yellow melting into baby blue. The figures are not sharply delineated from their backgrounds but instead seem to evaporate into their surroundings like a body dissolving into a bath, becoming part of an all-encompassing atmosphere.

Yuskavage's nudes are salacious nymphets of a distinctly mutant order, creatures whose puckered lips, fluffy hair, and curvaceous bodies often feature distended, ski-slope breasts, missing noses, or strangely phallic navels. The psychosexual tug of these warped images of damaged girls is further emphasized by their sense of complete and utter self-possession. Heads cocked suggestively and eyes flirting with abandon, they push conventional notions of allure to a level of excess that is both outrageously funny and embarrassing—even painful.

Currin too paints nudes that are frank mutations, but he does it in a distinctly different way. He begins with painterly traditions that are not modern: the mute sign language of the carefully deployed hands in a Botticelli; the solemn



Contrary to their appearances, Ingrid Calame's ZAP glunk (left), a 24-by-24-inch enamel on aluminum, and p-CHEEW-chtu-chtu (opposite page), a 48-by-48-inch enamel on aluminum, are not improvised. She designs her paintings by tracing stains she finds in alleys, parking lots, and driveways.



eroticism of Northern Renaissance painters such as Lucas Cranach; the anatomical fictions (extra vertebrae in the spine, boneless fingers, swanlike necks) that J.A.D. Ingres made nonetheless convincing to the eye; luminous bodies emerging from tobacco-brown darkness in the manner of Rembrandt; transparent veils layered over creamy skin in luscious emulation of oil paint glazed over canvas; and more. Currin grafts them together, like an enraptured Dr. Frankenstein sewing up salvaged limbs.

These and other exquisitely achieved technical effects are then seamlessly fused with such up-to-the-minute mass media fantasies as the inhuman seductresses who grace the covers of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. The result is a dizzying visual time warp.

On a Currin canvas, a Botticelli Venus is just as of-the-moment as a Cosmo girl. And why not? After all, inexpensive international travel

and the proliferation of art museums have given today's average denizen of the art world more access to paintings than any potentate of the past could have imagined.

The revived interest in painting today owes its emergence to a variety of factors, and surely one of the most important is the simple passage of time. For young artists such as Prieto, Calame, Yuskavage, and Currin, the crucial artistic watershed of the '60s is ancient history. The once ferocious struggle over painting's future and legitimacy as an artistic language is, for all intents and purposes, as remote to their experience as the Peloponnesian War. Neither reactionary nor retrograde, their paintings instead invoke past works of art as peers in an ongoing dialogue.

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