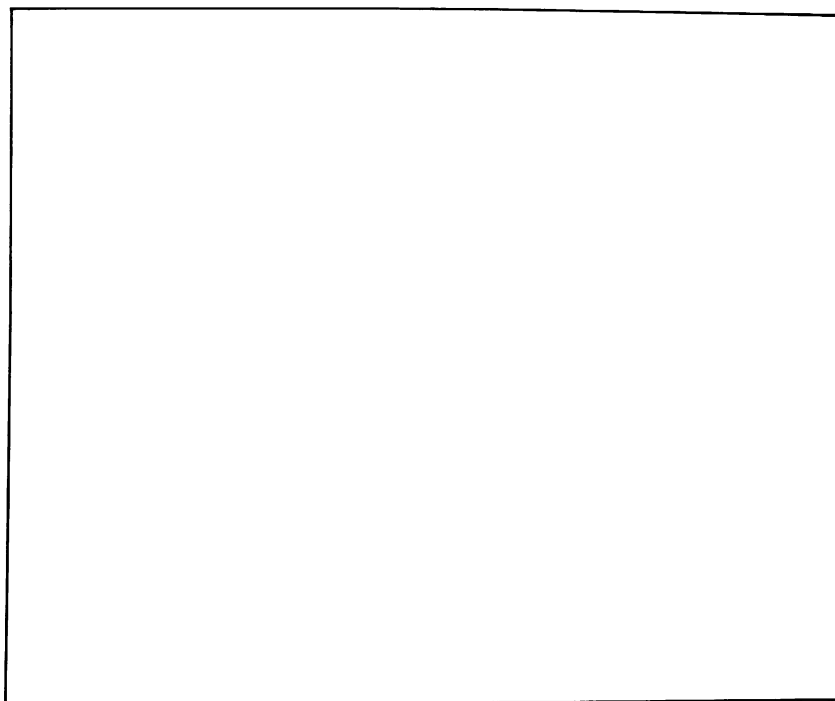


IN THE REALM OF THE MONOCHROMATIC



David Budd
Tony De Lap
Porfirio Di Donna
Ruth Ann Fredenthal
Marcia Hafif
Gordon Hart
Valerie Jaudon
Alan Kleiman
Marilyn Lenkowsky
Robert Mangold
George Peck
Edda Renouf
Milton Resnick
Paul Rotterdam
Robert Ryman
Frederic Thursz
Jerry Zeniuk

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for the Renaissance Society by Michael Walls,
Director, Anderson Gallery, Virginia
Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

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MONOCHROME PAINTING

Carter Ratcliff

Monochrome paintings are so often treated as unimpeachable emblems of esthetic seriousness that a reminder of their usefulness to interior decoration can come as a shock. Yet that usefulness is an obvious fact. Monochrome goes best with a spare, half-empty look in interiors that may well be on its way out, along with functionalism in architecture. Nonetheless, glass and chrome furniture, smooth white walls and low-keyed carpeting are still prevalent enough to give the mode a current decorative value. A large gray canvas can relieve the severity of a blank wall without undercutting the spirit of all that white. In a way, the presence of the painting doubles up the spirit, literally so (there are now two starknesses), and more elusively, as well, for the canvas makes it clear that the spirit of starkness is being consciously courted.

These decorative functions are an embarrassment to the "esthetic purity" of the monochrome canvas, this emblem of seriousness generated out of the careers of such modernist heroes as Kasimir Malevich, Ad Reinhardt and Agnes Martin. Embarrassments must be faced, but first we must continue with our example and ask why, if a decorative gray is required, must one bother with painting at all? Why not just paint a patch of wall gray? The reason is that a patch of that sort would constitute supergraphics, a kind of interior decoration (or design) which is associated not with houses and apartments but with institutions of an inelegant nature (college dorms, city agencies). As decoration, monochrome painting signals affluence, first of all; next, it signals good taste of a kind that

is both formally and culturally restrained.

Monochrome's formal restraint is obvious enough. It needs no comment. In the late 1970s, however, this sort of imagery shows restraint of a less obvious kind—a restrained restraint, so to speak. A collector of monochrome painting aligns himself with a mode that is current but not aggressively up-to-date. As this exhibit proves, the mode is still active, yet these present-day examples have their proximate roots in the maturation of minimalism, which occurred nearly fifteen years ago. And, as Malevich's name reminds us, monochrome painting has long been with us in this century. So a liking for monochrome shows, these days, that one is not overeager in matters of taste.

Another reason for preferring a gray monochrome canvas to a patch of gray paint is that the canvas, however executed, must have a richness of texture not available to the simpler image. That texture, advancing from the wall with the help of the stretcher apparatus, might be as helpful as the painting's gray tone in completing an interior. This consideration reminds us that an image which is also an object, a physical presence, gains power to the degree that its physicality is clear.

But power for what? For enhancing the look of someone's room? Well, yes, and we do well to remember that the greatest secular art from all periods has been intended, in part, as interior decoration. At the same time, we find it difficult to forget that art has—or can have—other functions. It is capable of other meanings.

These are especially important points in a discussion of monochrome painting because it is so often dismissed as "mere decoration" (as, not so incidentally, were such early modernist styles of painting as Fauvism and Cubism). Furthermore, monochrome painting is often praised, purchased and employed as "mere decoration"—and understandably so, for, as we've seen, it can perform certain decorative jobs very well. Thus some of monochrome's detractors join with some (not all) of its supporters in attributing to it a

quality of "mereness." It is capable of looking good in a certain unchallenging way, and the question follows whether or not that is all it is capable of doing.

Painted panels in a quattrocento Florentine house might show a restful pattern of leaves and branches. And that pattern might go very well with the furniture in the room. But there's more to it. Beneath the decorative trees is an allegorical rendering of marriages, alliances and other political realities. Over all is a suggestion of religious values. Beyond all that, the image might (or might not) present realities of a different order, those large, currently powerful meanings for which we contemporaries go to art in the first place. Is monochrome capable of those?

I ask these questions in the vicinity of "mere decoration," on the assumption that if we can begin to find answers here, where the questions themselves have to struggle to exist, then the effort might come to something. There isn't much point in asking after monochrome's value in the realm of the "purely esthetic," where the answer, invariably positive, is taken for granted—and where, oddly enough, monochrome painting is reduced to "mereness" in yet another way: by serving as the occasion for those invariably positive judgments I mentioned just now. This service reduces monochrome to a prop in a ritual of "seriousness."

Somewhere between the realm of "mere decoration" and the realm of the "purely esthetic" (somewhere, in other words, in the world of ordinary concerns), we'll see if monochrome painting has any meanings or functions worth caring about. But let's start in the decorative realm. Let's start with monochrome's austere attractiveness, its triviality, for that at least requires us to look at it. In the other realm, that of the "purely esthetic," monochrome's absolute, utter seriousness is taken for such a secure fact that we are left with no motive to look at any particular instance of the mode, only to categorize it as the working out of a conceptualized possibility—which

is another way of pointing to the "mereness" of monochrome as a "purely esthetic" enterprise: a painting is defeated, its presence as an object is destroyed by neglect, if the possibility it realizes is experienced as richly in conception as in perception.

Whenever a monochrome canvas is used as a landmark in the mapping of a "pure" or reductive esthetic, thinking about the work in that function (and perhaps describing it in a properly constricted manner), is indeed as satisfactory as looking at it. On the other hand, to judge monochrome as decoration requires subtle, if superficial, perceptions which will lead us, perhaps, to see beyond the various kinds of "mereness" with which the mode is afflicted these days.

Let's go back to the texture we noticed when we judged monochrome painting superior to supergraphics in the completion of a scheme of interior decoration. Imagine that we're talking about a particular painting, one that allows the grain of the canvas to show through. Now, it's clear that a pleasing decorative effect might link that grain to the grain of upholstery, a rug, curtains. But, after all, it is bound to be a rather weak link. Canvas has a subtle texture. The most powerful effect will be created by the link between this painting and other paintings, whether monochrome or not, present or absent, abstract or representational. In our culture, the very substance of canvas is charged with a multitude of rich meanings—vague, perhaps, but rich. Only a deprived individual looks at a stretched canvas and fails to make a series of powerful associations.

If one were especially concerned with the look of a spare, half-empty room, it might be best to be just such a person—to be able to look at our imaginary gray monochrome and see it not merely but *solely* for its immediate decorative potential. Most of us would find this impossible. The very sight of canvas alerts us to the possibility of important meanings of the kind paintings have conveyed to us in the past. Sometimes, particular meanings are

recalled. All this alerting and reminding is likely to take place unconsciously or half-consciously, but that doesn't matter. The point is that canvas—the material itself—has an aura in our culture, and those of us who belong to the culture in an active way feel its aura even in the presence of the most subdued monochrome.

What often sets monochrome paintings apart from Rembrandts and Pollocks and other paintings whose images show lively internal differentiations is a particularly strong resistance to reason-mongering. It's always hard to say exactly why we like or dislike a painting, but monochrome seems to make it well-nigh impossible. Favorable or not, our judgments of works in this mode often sound a bit mindless, for, when pressed for reasons, we tend to retreat to a realm of "mereness."

In the realm of the "merely decorative," we might say, "Well, I like this monochrome painting very much. It goes so well with our host's curtains." Or his rug. Or his furniture. Then again, we might retreat to the realm of the "purely esthetic," where the painting is judged sufficient or not as a (mere) sign of progress in some conceptual development, some unfolding of art history, or whatever. In that realm, we might say, "Well, of course I think this painting is very important. It is so-and-so's crucial step toward the completion of a series he began in 1977. . . ." Even when such reasons are accurate in ascribing motives to the artist (which is rarely the case), they're not much good because they're incomplete. Reaching the endpoint of a conceptual scheme, working out to an ultimate degree some "problem" thrown up by the analysis of art history—neither of these reasons nor anything like them provides sufficient motive for an adult to make art. Thus, while they may be good enough for art students headed for academic careers, a viewer cannot translate them into good reasons for a favorable judgment of a painting.

The only art which we find it possible to take seriously is that intended to convey important meanings. Any "purely esthetic" motive for painting

a monochrome canvas simply doesn't allow meaning to be important enough. That is because meaning in the realm of the "purely esthetic" is constricted to much the same degree that meaning in the realm of the "merely decorative" is constricted. In the latter realm, it is held to the scale of a room so small it contains nothing but signs of the socio-cultural aspirations of its inhabitant. In the realm of the "purely esthetic," on the other hand, meaning must be adjusted to the scale of careers defined at base by the desire to separate art from the rest of the culture, to make art a specialty manageable by those intimidated by the large meanings we look for in art.

Where does that leave us? We don't want to diminish our sense of this imaginary gray monochrome by responding to it in a miniaturizing mode, a mode geared to small meanings. We do not, this is, want to sound like fans of interior decorating or experts in the ingrown "issues" of the art world. We'd much rather sound as if we lived fully in the world, had a sense of what matters, and knew how to see art in respect to other things of importance. In sum, we would like to be able to sound as if we could manage important matters—important meanings, especially; and yet this monochrome, glowing (let us say) with an aura of profound significance, stymies us. It is, after all, an expanse of sheer gray.

The work has proportions, but it seems impossible to say anything about them without sounding completely inane. The measurements of stretcher bars do not, of themselves inspire deep reasons for judgments. What are we to do? Say nothing. That's an honorable response, but it won't do for every occasion. Important meanings demand, sooner or later, to be communicated, not only from their source to us—from painting to viewer—but, very often, between us and those nearby. Yet the monochrome presents no obvious opening. Its visual equivalence of muteness continues to render us mute. The sheerness of its self-contained presence seems to defeat language itself. And

there, of course, is our opening. We must talk about that sheerness.

This brings us back once more to the texture of the surface. That canvas grain, supporting paint and showing through it, makes the object undeniably what it is: a painting. Let's imagine it to be a *dull* gray monochrome. Still, there is something aggressive here: this object insists with every aspect of its visible being and with every association generated by that visibleness that it is a painting, the product of a painter's effort. This object is symbol, sign and evidence of the painter's intention to paint a painting. Thus the work has an aura of willfulness. It is, in all its physical diffidence, a monument to individual will.

In the earlier works to which this imaginary gray monochrome alludes, the painter's will is sensed obliquely as we work our way through matters of content and style. The latter present a labyrinth of sorts, the penetration of whose twists and turns is a coming-to-know a work of art. Whether we are looking at Rembrandt's image of Athena or Pollock's record of his gestures, we usually see the painting first as a reference beyond itself to figures (or, in Pollock's case, energies) in imaginary space. Then, with Rembrandt as much as Pollock, we look to the surface of the painting to see how the painter has built that pictorial space and populated it, and how the quality of his building modifies his results. That is, we learn to see a relationship between the painter's style and his content.

The deeper our intuitions, the more complex they get. Finally, we see that no firm line can be drawn between style and content, between what is built pictorially and how it is built. A boundary disappears and yet we are not lost, for we see that the ultimate blurring—or unity—of "what" and "how" is specific to each painter. Rembrandt forces us to search out the details of his style beneath the immediacy of his images, with their aggressively persuasive "psychological truth." By contrast, Pollock threatens to overwhelm us with the obvious "how" of his style, forcing us to step back and

readjust our eyes in order to see the imaginary pictorial space of his images—the space that must be there for them to count as serious paintings, joined to major artistic tradition.

At any rate, we map the labyrinth of their art with what we take to be their stable characteristics. In each instance, this gives us an oblique sense of the painter's will to paint, for it shows that he engages his medium in a consistent, not an erratic manner; that he gives himself over to it deliberately, not fortuitously. Our coming to know an artist's will affects those meanings of his which we have already grasped, because it heightens the tension between *his* meanings and all the others of which the medium is capable and which he has rejected—willfully even where necessarily—in favor of his own. This is why we say it helps to see a painter's work in the context of other painting.

Thus, if a painting is a labyrinth we thread in order to arrive at that point where the artist's will generates meaning, then the context of the work extends the labyrinth, complicates it further—and it might, upon realizing that, be a relief to turn from Rembrandt's Baroque or Pollock's New York School to a dull gray monochrome whose sheer paintedness, whose willful insistence on its seriousness, reduces all of art history to sheer context.

Yet this relief is problematic for it precipitates us into the realm of the "purely esthetic," where we don't really have to look at the monochrome for it to function as a relief from questions of style and content, will and meaning. It's enough to glance at the painting from the corners of our eyes, or, just as satisfactorily for this purpose, we might reduce it to concept. But what about the painting's texture, that quality which gives it its aura in the first place, which assures us that the object in question is indeed linked to the tradition of painting? How can we ignore that, as we are inclined, or on occasion required, to do in the realm of "pure esthetics"? We can't, because we can't come to terms with a painting by ignoring a quality on which its claim to

be a painting rests. But if this and other monochrome paintings have a right to make that claim, then their textures—grainy or smooth—must join with their shapes, tones and colors in images that refer beyond themselves in some way; as do the images of the Baroque, the New York School and other sorts of serious Western painting.

Does monochrome refer beyond itself? Well, yes. We've seen that it refers to the will that brings it into existence. But, taken in isolation, this is a too-easily conceptualizable reference; and, worse yet, it is too easily subverted by decorative functions. So we must ask if monochrome ever attains the seriousness of referring to the world beyond the boundaries of interior decoration or minaturized art-world "issues." Answering yes, provisionally, and recalling the painterly nuances of Pollock, Rembrandt and others, I think our eyes are opened to the point where we do see in monochrome painting evocations of substance (from stone to mud to growing green and more), of light (from its near absence to its total presence), of weather (infinitely modulated and extended to mood). Painters' actions are evoked, as are works by other artists. And one sees extraordinary combinations of these referents.

Once the eye is alerted to contents of this sort, style comes into view—of necessity, for didn't we see that style and content are inextricable? It would be better to say that they are aspects of the same thing (the artist's meaning), and that now style, now content come into view, depending on the emphasis the eye brings to bear. When we see both together, thoroughly joined, we feel we are seeing well.

If monochromes are comparable to other sorts of paintings in their play of style and content, then they can make specific references not only to the world but to works of the past. The history of the art is activated. It becomes a lively, differentiated context for each monochrome painting, not sheer, conceptualized background. But the sheerness of the canvas remains. The painter's will to paint is

still the strongest aspect of his art, and his intention to convey meaning often seems stronger than any particular meaning he does convey.

This rearranges a long familiar pattern. In most Western art, as we've seen, the eye works its way through the labyrinth of the image to a sense of the painter's will, and thence on to his fullest meanings. In monochrome painting, the image asserts will first of all, and we must work our way through that sheerness to the specifics of an image. Only then do we find the opportunity to grasp particular meanings. Monochrome, to put it mildly, pushes the artist's presence forward in his work. This is not, I think, any more egotistic than other ways of making paintings. After all, there is ultimately nothing modest about a painter who requires us to wend our way through a shifting labyrinth of style and content to discover will and meaning which turn out to be in the quality of the labyrinth itself. What we can say, however, is that the painter who advances the sheerness of his will into the foreground signals a particular kind of desperation.

It's the desperation of an artist who feels that his art and its meanings are so beset by difficulties that the sheer presence of the will to carry on the art must be announced first-off in every work. Not every painter is a monochromist, so it's clear that some painters don't feel so threatened. That so many do is important, however. It is not a matter of agreeing or disagreeing with them. We do not, if we know much about painting, go to the medium for propositions with which we can agree or disagree. It is a matter, instead, of seeing that for monochrome painters part of the meaning of their art is that its very capacity for meaning is under attack, and that a painting must assert first of all a *will-to-mean-something*. Many monochromes have serene surfaces, yet all of them are responses to crisis.

Since painting, like poetry, is one of our culture's primary vehicles for meaning at the scale of the individual, it must be concluded that,

whatever else monochrome painting might tell us, it tells us first of all that some artists feel a threat to individuality itself. This is not news, nor is monochrome painting a hot new stylistic option. It is a well-established tradition by now, though I don't think the sense of crisis offered by the works in this show is establishmentarian. In some cases it may be trivial. In some others, it may even be paranoid, which is to say, hyperbolic and unfounded in the artist's experience. For the most part, however, the sheerness of monochrome, that aggressive signal of the artist's will to paint, feels like a legitimate response to the realm of the actual—our culture, with all the difficulties it offers the individual.

We know what these are, in their ideological, technological, economic and political proliferation. There is no need to list them, to point out that they not only threaten ordinary well-being but also the very possibility of that reflexive self-consciousness which is at the source of the best of Western culture. At least, I hope we know what these difficulties are. If we do, then it is possible for us to see that monochrome painting is a willful defiance of such threats. And a sense of this willfulness does much to enrich the mode's other references to the world, its evocations of light and matter, mood and action, and so on. The difficulty for us is to achieve an appropriate depth of response before the monolithic will of the monochrome painter drives us into the realm of the "merely decorative" or, worse yet, the realm of the "purely esthetic." It's quite a challenge.

CATALOGUE

David Budd

Untitled, 1976

78" x 63"

Oil on canvas

Lent by Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York City

Mr. Budd was born in St. Petersburg, Florida, in 1927.

Tony DeLap

The Wizard's Will, 1979

42" x 42" x 3½"

Wood, canvas, acrylic

Lent by the artist, courtesy of Janus Gallery, Venice, California

Mr. DeLap was born in Oakland, California, in 1927.

Porfirio DiDonna

Untitled, 1977

66" x 54"

Oil on linen

Lent by the artist

Mr. DiDonna was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1942.

Ruth Ann Fredenthal

Untitled, 1976

60" x 60"

Oil on linen

Lent by the artist

Ms. Fredenthal was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1938.

Marcia Hafif
Cadmium red medium, Chrome oxide opaque, 1977
62" x 50"
Oil on canvas
Lent by Sonnabend Gallery, New York City

Ms. Hafif was born in Pomona, California, in 1929.

Gordon Hart
March, 1975
81" x 66"
Oil on canvas
Lent by the artist, courtesy of Susan Caldwell Inc., New York City

Mr. Hart was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1940.

Valerie Jaudon
Koscinsko, 1975
72" x 72"
Oil on canvas
Lent by Leo S. Guthman, Chicago

Ms. Jaudon was born in Greenville, Mississippi, in 1945.

Alan Kleiman
Without Title
66¼" x 50"
Oil on canvas
Lent by the artist

Mr. Kleiman was born in Brooklyn, New York.

Marilyn Lenkowsky
Untitled (Dog Star), 1975
96" x 32" x 24"
Oil on canvas
Lent by Don and Mera Rubell, New York City

Ms. Lenkowsky was born in New York City, in 1947.

Robert Mangold
Untitled, 1978
Two panels, each 70" x 49"
Acrylic on canvas
Lent by the artist, courtesy of Young Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Mr. Mangold was born in North Tonawanda, New York, in 1937.

George Peck
Joan's Doorway, 1978-79
84" x 48" x 3¼"
Oil on canvas on a masonite and wood armature
Lent by the artist, courtesy of Susan Caldwell Inc., New York City

Mr. Peck was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1941.

Edda Renouf
Autumn Sound III, 1978
59" x 59"
Acrylic on linen canvas
Lent by the artist, courtesy of Young Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Ms. Renouf was born in Mexico City, Mexico, in 1943.

Milton Resnick
Untitled, 1975
36¼" x 60"
Oil on canvas
Lent by Max Hutchinson Gallery, New York City

Mr. Resnick was born in Bratislav, Russia, in 1917.

Paul Rotterdam
Substance 264, 1976
58" x 55⅞"
Acrylic on canvas
Lent by the artist, courtesy of Susan Caldwell Inc., New York City

Mr. Rotterdam was born in Wiener Neustadt, Austria, in 1939.

Robert Ryman
Untitled, 1958
43" x 43"
Oil on cotton
Lent by the artist, courtesy of Young Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Mr. Ryman was born in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1930.

Frederic Thursz
Isenheim #2, 1978-79
78" x 81"
Oil on linen
Lent by the artist

Mr. Thursz was born in Casablanca, Morocco, in 1930.

Jerry Zeniuk
Untitled Number 71, 1979
30" x 30"
Oil on linen
Lent by the artist

Mr. Zeniuk was born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1945.