

Shaping Up

By MARTHA MCWILLIAMS

Works by Andrea Way
At Brody's Gallery to May 1

Works by W.C. Richardson
At Baumgartner Galleries to April 29

"Paintings plus"
At Marsha Mateyka Gallery to May 1

Washington painters W.C. Richardson and Andrea Way have been exploring the terrain of analytical abstract painting for years, developing pictorial vocabularies that derived from their interests in mathematics and science—the physical sciences in Richardson's case, the natural sciences in Way's. And although for the past 12 years Way has actually been making drawings in ink on paper, she has achieved the expressive scale and intellectual complexity of painting. In her show of new works at Brody's Gallery, she now is painting, with acrylics on paper and on canvas, and this represents an important shift in conception as well as materials and appearance. Similarly, Richardson's new work at Baumgartner Galleries documents new developments in his style, particularly his approach to surface and form. As a counterpoint, it is provocative to consider New Yorker L.C. Armstrong's recent works at Marsha Mateyka Gallery, which also present both a new technique for the artist and a variant of the abstract analytical style.

Way's new work chronicles her dialogue between drawing and painting, a dialogue by which she is hoping to make a transition from the former through exploring the materials and gestures of the latter. The grid, that preferred structuring device of so much 20th-century painting, is still her foundation, and the references to such natural phenomena as repetition and decorative order still appear, but a new consciousness of surface—a painter's consciousness perhaps—is beginning to emerge in these works. Up to now, Way's complex nets of

lines and colors have seemed to exist in a pictorial space erected in front of the picture plane, almost sculpturally palpable hallucinations of some aspect of infinity or theoretical meaning. In the new work, Way has discovered the surface itself, and most of these drawings and paintings on canvas and paper are clearly located on that plane. But they are not at all flat. Instead, pictorial space begins at the surface and seems to continue behind it, except that Way's new vocabulary of freehand squiggles and lines as well as the painterly surface textures undermine the possibility of illusion. This is particularly true of *2160 Squares* and *96 Squares*, but also of *Gemini*, *Twins*, and *Gray Matter*. A significant shift in the location of the paintings themselves, this parallels a shift in iconography. No longer diagramming the landscape of conceptions, Way seems to be exploring the more uncomfortable but full-blooded environments of experience.

Richardson's new work exemplifies a similar shift toward the concrete. But whereas Way's work is informed by a sensibility nourished on a close study of the natural environment, Richardson works from what he calls "understood, not observed nature." Until recently, his works were artful pictorial commentaries on his understandings of the ambiguities and paradoxes of modern science, gestural loops and webs of color tracing the knowable after it was gone. The new works contain forms, perplexingly asymmetrical shapes which emerge from or sink into the gridded ground sculpted by concentric rings of paint. In some, particularly *Evenflow*, *Fielding Fits*, and *Brown Steps*, a thick, knife-smoothed ground breaks into the field of rings, producing spatial ambiguity and visual tension between the contrasting layers of image and texture.

This ambiguity and tension combines with a new confrontational

quality, producing a surprising aggressiveness and even brutality in a few of the forms. In this move from the diagram to the model, so to speak, Richardson has moved from intellectual to physical confrontation. And just as the paintings refuse an easy mental resolution through symmetry and anticipated balance, they refuse both illusionism and the appeal of elegance.

It is the appeal of elegance, however, that gives L.C. Armstrong's new works their disconcerting power. They possess a luscious reflective surface created by carefully smoothed epoxy resin which produces an exquisite, almost crystalline finish. The image beneath—shadowy shapes and looping lines punctuated by actual holes shot or drilled through the aluminum support—is created by a burning bomb fuse held against the enameled surface. Thus they do document, as do Richardson's and

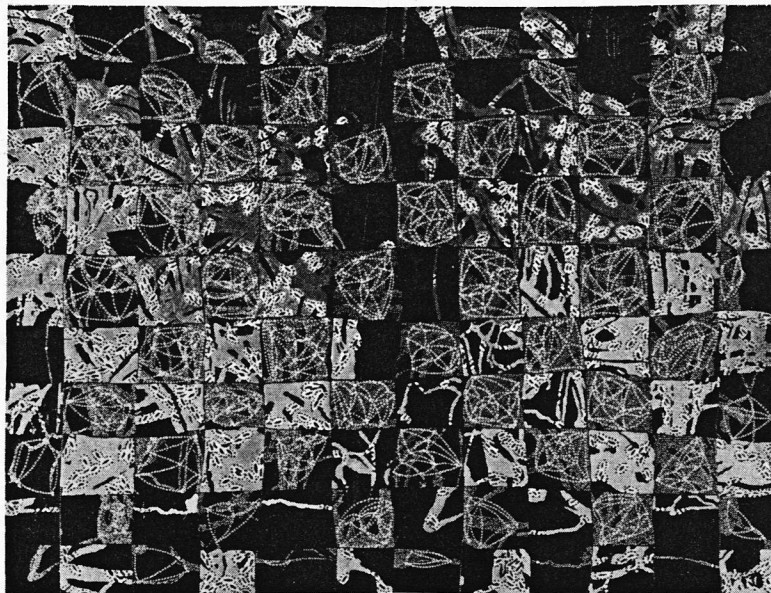
Way's, the process of their creation, but Armstrong's works emphasize contradictions and paradoxes more explicitly.

The constructed nature of these "paintings" may relate to Armstrong's other work in sculpture, some of which was included in the recent Gallery One exhibition "Reverberations" at the Corcoran. But although her materials are not the conventional ones of painting, she uses them effectively to extend painting's narrative capacities. For example, such a profound component of the postwar discourse of painting as gesture is examined here in terms of the danger and violence it entails. That exploration is then presented in materials—enamel and epoxy resin—that are sensuously appealing yet visually cold and hard.

Of the three artists, Armstrong's works provoke the most extreme oscillations between the tactile and the repellent, between the attractive and the unsettling, between the illusions created by the image and the technical means by which they are achieved—but it is only a question of degree. Both Way and Richardson seem to be moving toward such contradictions and away from a kind of cheerful pictorial commentary on the paradoxes of modern science. That they now occupy a more ambivalent position is particularly intriguing because they seem to have reached their new conclusions through examinations of their painting practice. Armstrong, on the other hand, comes directly from the theoretical tradition of the '80s, which has tended to question the possibility of forming definite conclusions and has practiced greater skepticism in accepting the products of research and tradition. Present in the work of all three, however, are characteristics of '90s paintings that distance themselves from—even if they don't outright reject—pictorial appeal at the same time that they seem to be courting it. Awkward, aggressive, and anxious, they manage to speak truthfully of painting and of life, yet they retain enough decorative poise to reassure us that the ambitions and traditions of art are still intact.

CP

GALLERY



Andrea Way's *Twins* (1992)