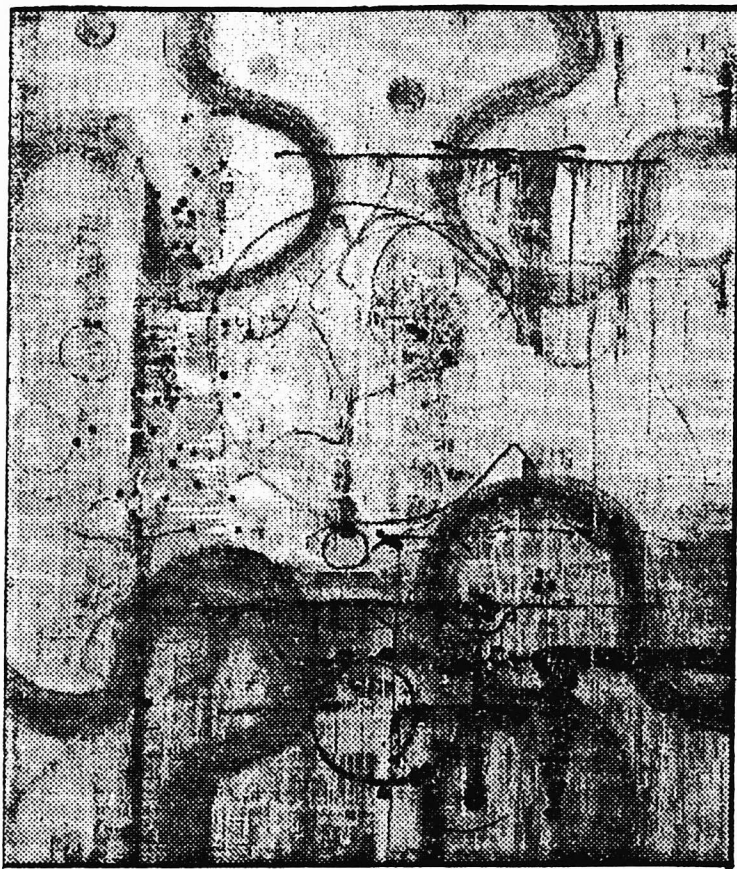




Willy Heeks's "The Room," from the Corcoran exhibition.



Michael Miller's untitled acrylic and oil on paper.

Art

Abstract And Personal

At the Corcoran Biennial, A Passionate Bow to the Past

By Paul Richard
Washington Post Staff Writer

Viewers who've been told that abstract painting is finished—that modernism's done, that oil paint and brushes are hopelessly antique—ought to see the 42nd Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting, which goes on view tomorrow at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

A new, and yet not wholly new, strategy for painting abstract pictures in the '90s unifies the first two-thirds of this 13-artist group show. Its last third disappoints. Still, the best of its young painters are improvising classicists. In some ways they resemble those passionate, inventive and adamant musicians who insist on playing jazz in an age that's ruled by rap. These artists, too, have wed themselves to a great tradition, and will not let it die.

Most of them are women. Few of them are famous. All are true believers in the legacy that links visions once thought disparate, from the painted grids of Mondrian to Jackson Pollock's drips, from field painting's atmospheres to the stripes of young Frank Stella and early Jasper Johns. The painters at the Corcoran come from places as diverse as Bucharest and Hollywood, Providence, Lausanne and Humboldt, Tenn., and yet they have so much in common—a vigor of attack, an adherence to a blending of accident and order, and a careful overcoming of the foreground-background schism—that they seem to share a style.

The new work in this Biennial is complex instead of simple. Its spaces have about them a sense of woven richness; they're deep instead of flat. This is painting about painting that, while loaded in its references to older abstract art, is deeply and affectively personal as

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well. Call that style what you will, you'll know it when you see it.

See the best works first. Walk straight through the museum, pass through the rotunda, and begin your exploration with the abstract pictures painted by New York's Willy Heeks. The Corcoran's Terrie Sultan, who curated the exhibition, has devoted most of her attention to young painters who are united by one strong, coherent vision. But the close of her Biennial suggests a loss of nerve.

The exhibit, as it ends, veers toward the didactic, and toward the fading fashion for political correctness. It's as if she felt some nagging need to add to her Biennial a bit of local art, a bow to multiculturalism, some social-issue-driven pictures, and a touch of gay art too. The last artists here encountered tell you through their pictures that I'm Chinese and proud of it, or gay and glad to be so, or distressed by social failures, poor health insurance, say, or violence in the streets.

Heeks, and the eight good painters whose galleries succeed his—Michael Miller, Irene Pijoan, Lydia Dona, Judy Mannarino, Thomas Eric Stanton, Sabina Ott, L.C. Armstrong, and Washington's Andrea Way—are not politicians. They are bound to one another by their affirmation of the time-consuming act of making abstract pictures. They do not paint to preach.

All of them accept the way geometry's formalities—symmetries and parallels and underlying grids—can organize an abstract space, yet all are wholly unafraid of the splash, the accidental drip, the free and unplanned gesture of the action painter's stroke.

Most of them will show you somewhere in their paintings a circle of pure color that they have pressed flat against the picture plane, but they do not merely leave it there. Instead they tear it loose and hurl it back through painted depth until it seems to turn into a flying oval or a spinning curve spiraling through space. The grids that rule their pictures are never strict as Mondrian's. Their stripes are less severe than those stacked up so cleanly in the flags of Jasper Johns. The figure-ground division of so much older abstract painting is eroded in these pictures until the foregrounds and the backgrounds seem to meld and interweave.

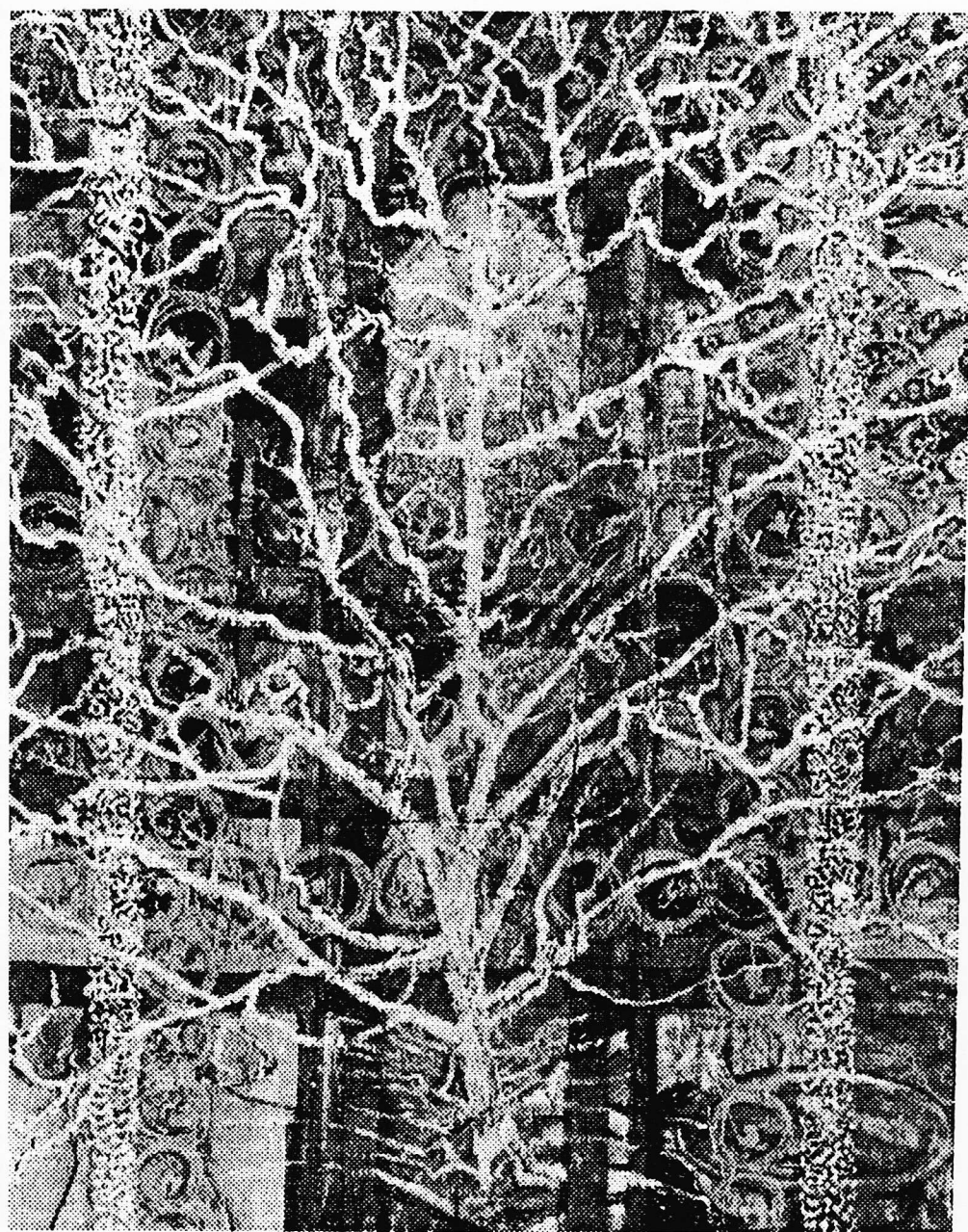
The strongest of these artists has spent the past decade ignoring its wan fashions. Heeks, who's constantly exploring yet constantly restrained by an instinct for the orderly, shows no interest whatsoever in the coy appropriations of postmodernist convention. Nor is he attracted to latter-day conceptualism's haughty, knowing cool; nor does he accept that painting is defunct, that television's flicker and advertising's sheen and image replication today control our lives. His sub-

ject is instead the struggle of the painter. There is daring in his art, and much reconsideration. He refuses one-shot art.

Miller, too, fights to hold in balance the grid and its destruction, the scribble and the strict. The abstract painters showing are not distanced formalists. Their angers and affections, their successes and defeats, are apparent in their markings. Pijoan's mournings for dead friends, and her memories of travel, and bird song heard in childhood, and moonlight glimpsed on water, flicker in her pictures. Dona is less nostalgic. Her colors are acidic—she goes for pinks and bilious greens—and an odd, sardonic mixing of confidence and doubt, of song and incoherence, shivers in her art.

Stanton's "Trees of Life" series counters chaos with firm symmetries, and death-evoking surfaces—those shreds of rag, those weathered twigs—with imagery suggestive of unconquerable life. Ott's most impressive picture is a vast all-over canvas covered, in encaustic, with numberless white roses, flowers that evoke innocence, and the lacy veil of the wedding gown, even as that huge white work conjures recollections of white-on-white Maleviches, Rauschenbergs and Rymans, and other far-from-feminine works of abstract art.

Way's dense, obsessive works on paper look a little weak here among all these huge paintings. While the other artists use whole walls, Way appears constrained by the scale of the page. Still her work is much superior to the maps of China offered by Nancy Chunn, who litters them with



Thomas Eric Stanton's large painting "Tree of Life (Hannibal)."

ulls, and sketches of antiquities, and
ograms, and horses that often look
: pigs. Chunn is also represented

by a map of Panama whose red lines,
we learn from the catalogue, indicate
"enslavement," whose white lines

"may allude to both lucrative cocaine trade and the hegemony of Caucasian power structures." Lari Pittman's combinations of Victorian silhouettes and penises and owls are equally insistent hymns to male-male love. These pictures—and Tishan Hsu's Warholian, strictly gridded images of bullet wounds and diseased eyes, and Blue Cross and Blue Shield cards—diminish this Biennial, and shove it toward the voguish.

It is not such postscript pictures that make this show worth seeing. Many Corcoran Biennials have been little more than smorgasbords. This one, in marked contrast, has something worthwhile to teach.

That one can paint with twigs and rags, or with fields of white roses, or, as Armstrong does, with burnt fuse cord and sheets of carbon paper embedded in poured plastic—and still make abstract paintings—is one message of its strongest rooms. A path that leads away from the quick, the instant image, and from the past-discarding smugness of so much recent art, is mapped by Terrie Sultan's show. Its finest painters work with full knowledge of the past. They believe in complexity, they believe in searching too, and none of them are cynics. If Sultan is correct, their work will prove prophetic. The central and worth-stating theme of the "42nd Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting" remains the unexhausted promise of abstract art. The show will close Nov. 10.