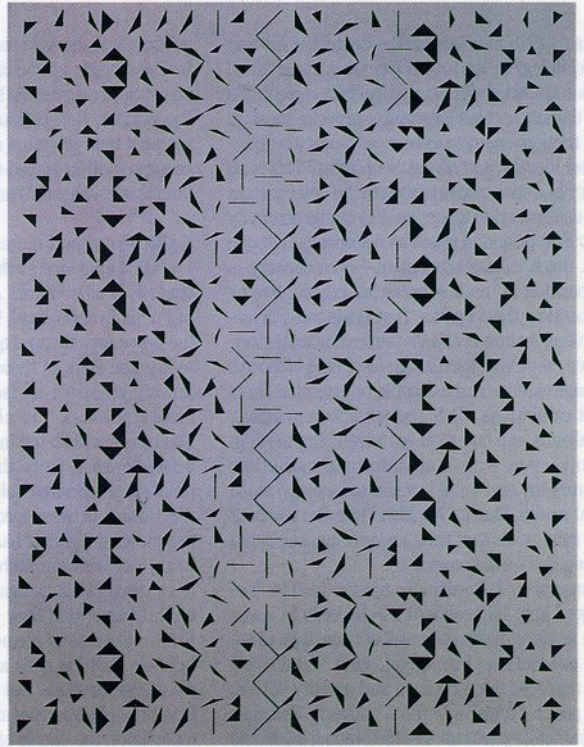


Above, Tad Griffin: *Untitled*, 1994, oil on paper, 28 by 20 inches. Courtesy Eugene Binder Gallery, Dallas.

Below, Tom Moody: *True Value*, 1994, acrylic on cardboard, 11½ by 6 by 1 inches. Courtesy Eugene Binder Gallery.



Above, Susie Rosmarin: #51, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 58 by 44 inches. Courtesy DiverseWorks, Houston.

Below, John Pomara: *Roller Derby*, 1994, oil, enamel and Varathane on canvas, 36 by 28 inches. Courtesy Eugene Binder Gallery.



REPORT FROM TEXAS

Going Against the Grain

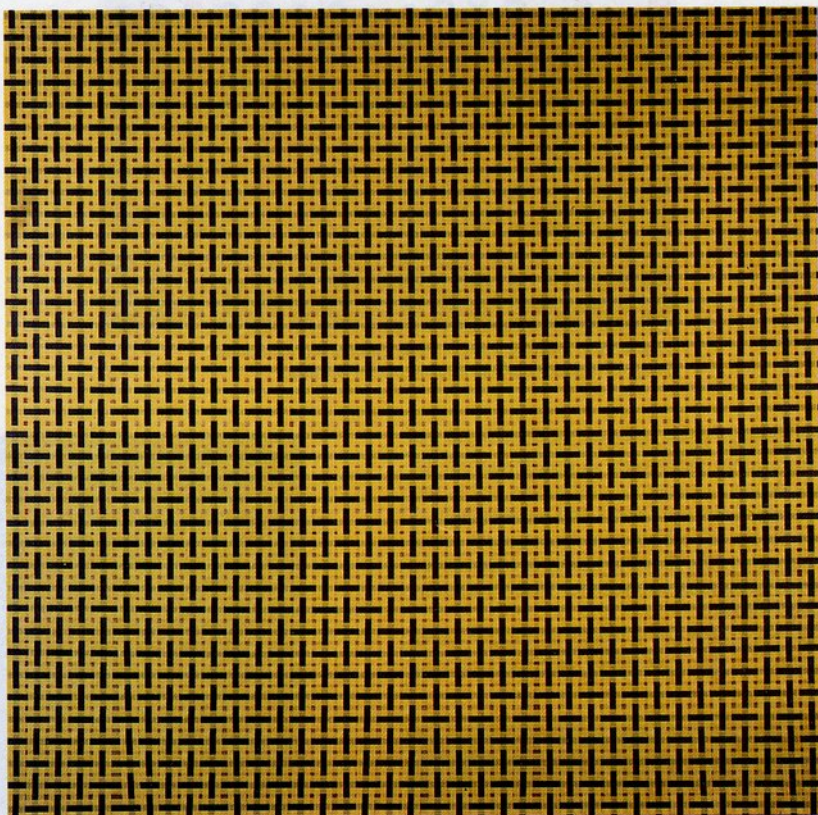
Recent exhibitions reveal that Texas, long known for its figurative and expressionistic art, has now begun to produce a surprising amount of abstract painting.

BY FRANCES COLPITT

Abstract painting . . . in Texas? Known for cowboys, cacti and *calaveras* (skulls), Texas cultivates its stereotypes. Most painting, sculpture and even installation work here is figurative, hotly colored and primarily expressionistic. The alternative to expressionism in Texas painting is narrative, represented by the influential styles of Vernon Fisher and ex-Texan Terry Allen. Donald Judd, who lived in West Texas, had little impact on art produced in the state. Artists continue to make pilgrimages to Marfa, but what they find is New York art transplanted to the suitably spare desert. Another shrine to abstraction, the Rothko Chapel in Houston, nourishes its visitors with a healthy dose of spirituality that reinforces the virtues of Rothko's branch of Abstract Expressionism, while remaining on the periphery of daily and artistic life in Texas. One of the few native examples of rigorous abstraction is the painting of Madeline O'Connor, who lives in Victoria and shows in Houston and Los Angeles. Although O'Connor's work is influenced by nature, and particularly the plumage and habits of South Texas birds, it remains austere geometric. Other abstract painters, such as Joseph Glasco, Gael Stack, Dick Wray, Robin Utterback and Danny Williams, pursue their own romantic versions of expressionism, the very idiosyncracies of which personalize and localize their styles. As Jamey Gambrell observed in a 1987 survey of art in the state [see *A.i.A.*, Mar. '87], "Neither abstract thinking nor abstract imagery are Texas pastimes."

A spate of exhibitions of abstract painting this season suggests that something is changing in the state. The artists involved do not see themselves as inheritors of a Texas sensibility or connected to older Texas varieties of abstraction. Many admire the paintings of Houston artist Perry House and refer to the work of Peter Halley, but the phenomenon, as it's unfolding, signals a nonregional and more worldly embrace of the conceptual—as opposed to the expressionistic—nature of abstract painting.

Three recent exhibitions included the work of Tad Griffin, a 28-year-old artist living in Houston. The University of Texas at Arlington's Center for Research in Contemporary Art (CRCA) hosted Griffin's first solo exhibition, which consisted of seven nearly identical paintings derived from a single system of mark-making [see *A.i.A.*, Feb. '95]. Using rollers, notched squeegees and templates, Griffin moves black oil paint across the surface of smoothly gessoed white canvases to produce hypnotic horizontal patterns. Intermittent blips and wavy disruptions of the lines' progress result from partially lifting the squeegee. The generally racy tempo of Griffin's paintings recalls the registration of scientific measurement by electrocardiographs or seismographs, while the grainy passages of thinly scraped paint look like magnifications of photo-



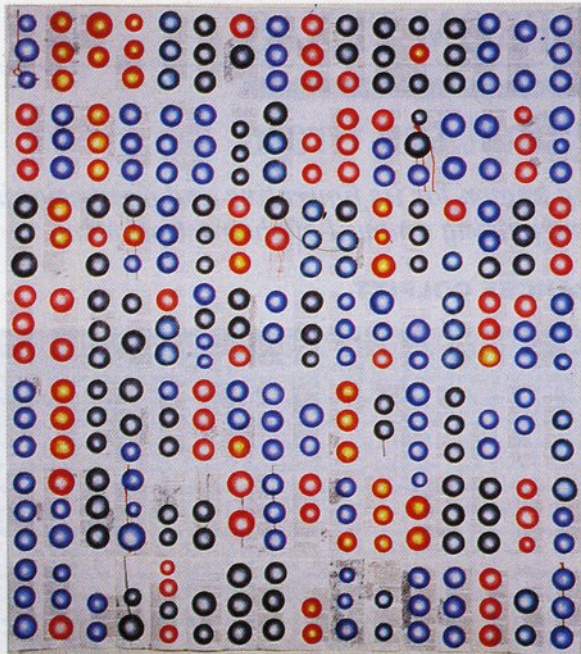
David Szafranski: *High Visibility Barrier*, 1994, nylon webbing, 88 inches square. Courtesy Eugene Binder Gallery.

graphic halftones, or a blurred record of something moving too fast for Muybridge's camera. Griffin's surfaces are elusive: nonillusionistically flat, unemphatic, yet satisfyingly seductive. Oblivious to the sensuous viscosity of oil paint, the immediacy of the painter's touch or (in the CRCA exhibition) the notion of painting as unique, original expression, Griffin pushes the limits of what a painting can be.

Two works on paper, with dry, slick surfaces comparable to his paintings, represented Griffin in "Part Two: Tad Griffin, Tom Moody, John Pomara, David Szafranski" at Eugene Binder Gallery in Dallas. This show of small-scale works was a coda to a spring 1994 exhibition organized by Pomara that included two large paintings by each of the same artists. A former assistant to Ray Parker in New York, Pomara was Griffin's teacher at East Texas State University in Commerce. The most painterly of the group, Pomara also uses a squeegee, but with much less graphic results. The cell-like dark-blue bubbles that populate the pale-yellow or white grounds of his paintings are slurred

by the application of the squeegee. Depending on how dry the paint is, some of the bubbles are scraped away, leaving only stains of their former existence. Others emit downward-moving streaks, like slow comets. Pomara's use of oil enamel and Varathane produces viscous, glossy pools or curled patches of opacity that undercut any lyrical possibilities of the bubble imagery. The biological metaphor evoked by the allusion to cell division is likewise displaced by imperfection and disorder. His are tough, unforgiving paintings that flirt with the decorative without giving in to it.

Dallas artist and critic Tom Moody describes the spherical forms that structure his paintings as "atoms," deriving from his earlier paintings of simulated molecular models. Far more rigid and intellectualized than Pomara's, Moody's bubbles are crisply delineated and illusionistically, if crudely, modeled. The grounds of his large paintings are composed of computer-printed drafts of his own writing, cut in half and reassembled to disrupt nar-



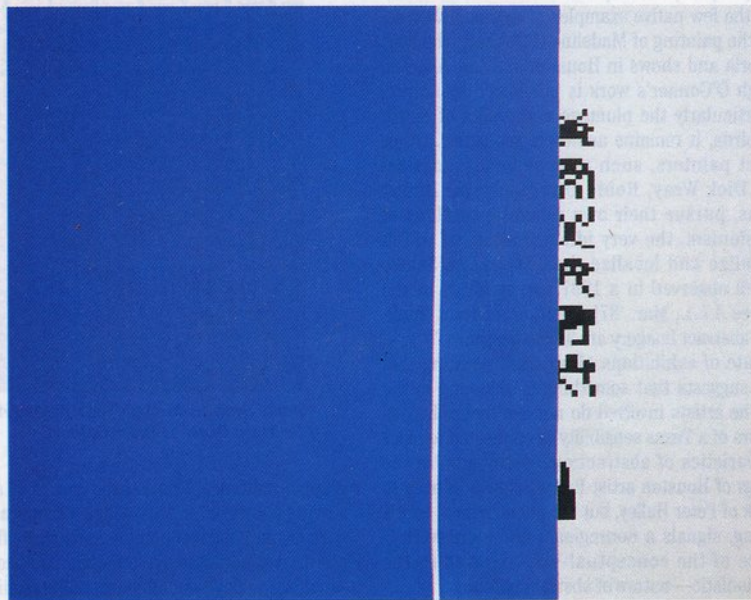
Tom Moody: *Untitled*, 1994, acrylic and ink on laser paper, 77 by 68 inches. Courtesy Eugene Binder Gallery.

rative meaning. The atoms are painted on top of the taped-together patchwork, in grid formation, to allude doubly to modernist abstraction and to the dichotomy of abstract images and representational words. In the fall exhibition at Binder, commercial packages for coffee filters or manila envelopes were recycled as painting supports for Moody's colorful spheres or ovoids.

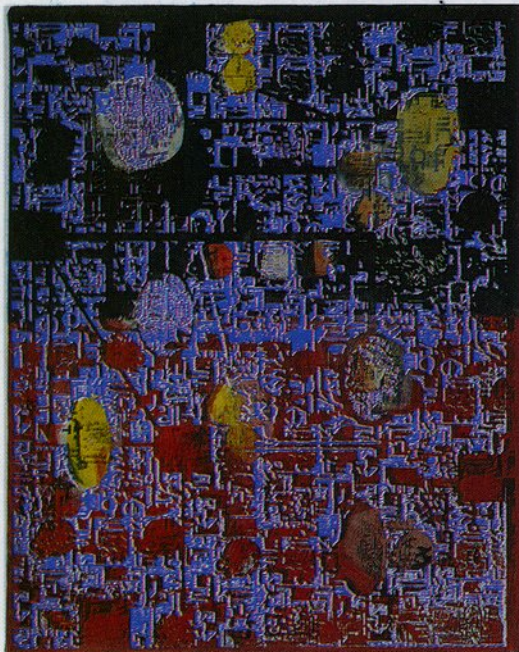
Referring to the use of readily identifiable found material in the making of paintings, David

substance that seems to absorb the gallery's light as if it were water. The painting is possessed of real body in contrast to an immaterially thin picture plane. A taut grid of yellow-and-white plastic webbing makes another small painting an abstract meditation on the banality of outdoor furniture. On a larger scale, yellow-and-black nylon webbing, which is manufactured for barricades, is woven into an optically dynamic pattern titled *High Visibility Barrier* (1994). The bounce and plasticity—in pictorial as well as material terms—tacitly conveyed by Szafranski's paintings gives them a sensuousness that bolsters his critiques of modernism and Minimalism.

In a solo exhibition at Texas Gallery in Houston, Aaron Parazette showed some of the most conceptually provocative and painterly work I've encountered. After he completed studies at the Claremont Graduate School in California, a residency at the Glassell School of Art brought Parazette to Texas in 1990. Glassell has produced some of Houston's most energetic and sophisticated young artists. Parazette's recent paintings are derived from wallpaper patterns, coyly referencing the familiar critique of abstraction (from Pollock's drips to Noland's stripes) as nothing more than wallpaper.



Jeff Elrod: *End Game*, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 79 by 97 inches. Courtesy DiverseWorks.



Wade Chandler: *Black and Blue*, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 20 by 16 inches. Courtesy DiverseWorks.

Szafranski describes his and Moody's works as "literalist abstraction," an ironic appropriation of Michael Fried's dismissive term for Minimal art based on its purported failure to transcend its own objecthood. Szafranski's paintings [see *A.i.A.*, Oct. '93], in fact, aren't painted, but are woven of strips of ribbon, webbing, tickets or other mass-produced materials to simulate the weave of canvas and the modernist grid. If his paintings were limited to this overlaid idea, there wouldn't be much to them, but Szafranski is sensitive to the tactile and coloristic aspects of his materials. *Sponge* (1994), for example, is woven of half-inch-thick strips of compressed sponge, a parched, dull, yellow-beige

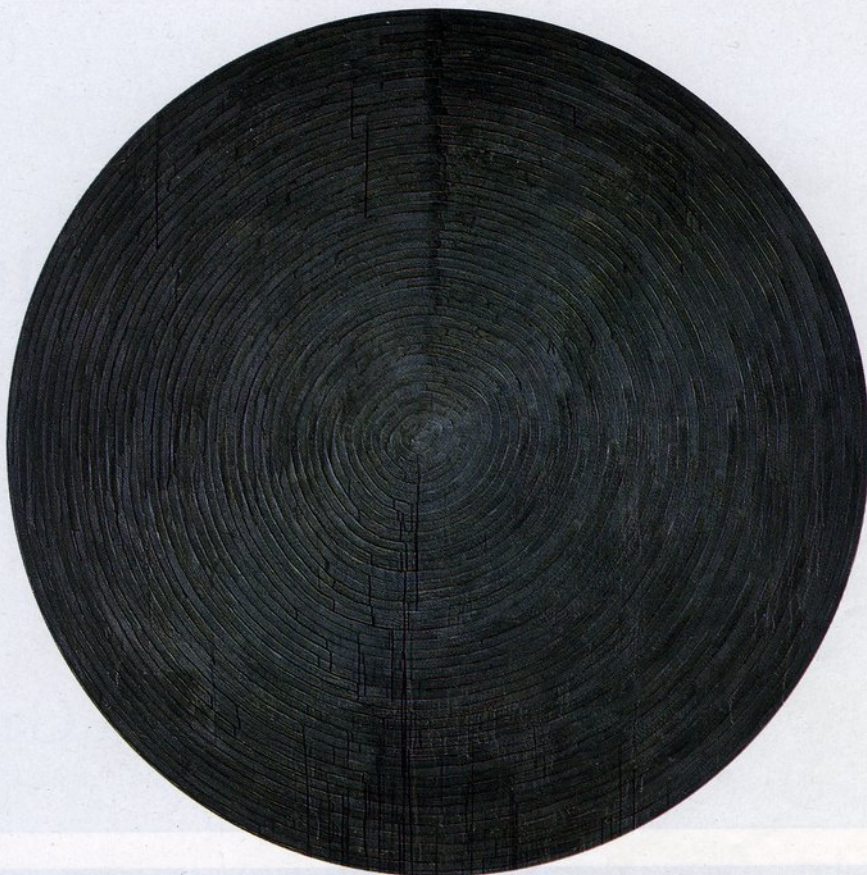
His approximately 6-foot-square canvases sport wavy lines, plaid patterns, hearts and balloons absurdly enlarged from their often minuscule prototypes. Using five coats of white enamel tinted with oil color, Parazette builds the shapes independently; a little cleft separates each from the flat color area around it. The glossy surfaces are palpable and impenetrable, with a flat slickness broken only by the eruption of random drips that resemble bad house-painting. The drips, which hang congealed from the bottom edge of the painting, counteract the repetitive regularity of the inane patterns. In *Easy Elegance* (1994) huge, cartoony ribbons tied in bows form a diagonal grid against a baby-blue field. The

Though they do not constitute a movement, most of these artists know one another, and a core group is involved in a serious dialogue about the possibility of abstraction in the '90s.

soothing effect of nursery wallpaper is exaggerated to the point of visual assault. Reflecting on the once-ubiquitous genre of stripe painting, *Tranquility* (1994) consists of triplets of vertical pink stripes on a cream-colored ground. The pattern is unexpectedly cut off at the right edge of the painting to interrogate the implicit endlessness of an abstract composition. Parazette positions himself as a cynic, concerned—as are so many young artists—with the impossibility of abstract painting after modernism. In spite of his doubt, his paintings are authentic and serious, conveying a disturbing beauty.

Coinciding with Parazette's show was an exhibition he organized for DiverseWorks in Houston. "Process • Strategy • Irony" included the work of seven Houston abstract painters who, unlike Parazette, have no investment in the modernist surface. Their paintings are literally thin; their surfaces are inscribed in the manner of writing on a page, without attributing material significance to painting's support. These works intend to convey information. Accordingly, the craftsmanship, in some cases, would make a modernist shudder.

Aaron Parazette: *Easy Elegance*, 1994, oil and enamel on canvas, 72 inches square.
 Courtesy Texas Gallery, Houston.



Joe Mancuso: *Roundabout*, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 72 inches in diameter.
 Courtesy Davis/McClain Gallery, Houston.

The captivating precision of Tad Griffin's paintings thus stood in stark contrast to the battered, hard-edged abstractions of corporate logos by Giovanni Garcia-Fenech. Jeff Elrod also gives new meaning to Bad painting with pencil marks and masking tape bleeds, but the offhand rawness of his work at least partially accounts for its interest. His images are abstractions of early video games, paralleling in their now-primitive technology Elrod's own adolescent technique. *End Game* (1994) pairs a slightly crooked Barnett Newman zip with creatures from *Space Invaders*, while in *Asteroids* (1994) the ghost of a gun, painted over in the black of the ground, takes aim at digitized stars. Wade Chandler, who recently moved to Chicago, also showed technology-driven paintings. Simulating the dense mazes of circuit boards, his imagery is actually drawn on a computer and then transferred to a silk-screen which is printed and over-printed on canvas. Intermingled with hand painting and glazing, the wavy hieroglyphic fields of circuitry float on top of rich, jewel-colored grounds. Although dense with incident and layer upon layer of abstract information, Chandler's small paintings are thin and spectral, like airy hallucinations.

Equally optical, but more starkly conceptualized, are Susie Rosmarin's black-and-white paintings. Crisply delineated lines and triangles knock against one another as if rotating in spontaneous generation. The appearance of improvised chaos produced



Giles Lyon: Scrambled Splatter, 1993, acrylic and latex, 65 by 94 inches. Courtesy Lynn Goode Gallery, Houston.

Szafranski describes his work as “literalist abstraction.” In fact, it isn’t painted but woven of ribbons, webbing, strips of tickets, etc., to simulate the weave of canvas and the modernist grid.

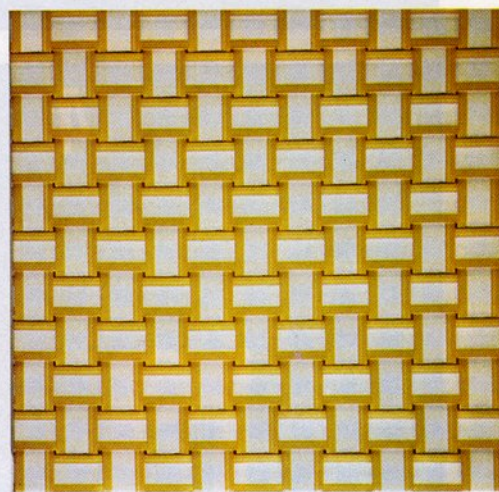
veyed the kind of rapidly consumable optical patterning suited to the temporal medium of video. Rotating the fiberboard support on a turntable, Mann applies raucous, high-keyed color with an airbrush to produce a speedy, kaleidoscopic image. The insouciance of Mann’s work—uniquely funky in this exhibition—is its most remarkable feature.

An exhibition of Giles Lyon’s work at Lynn Goode

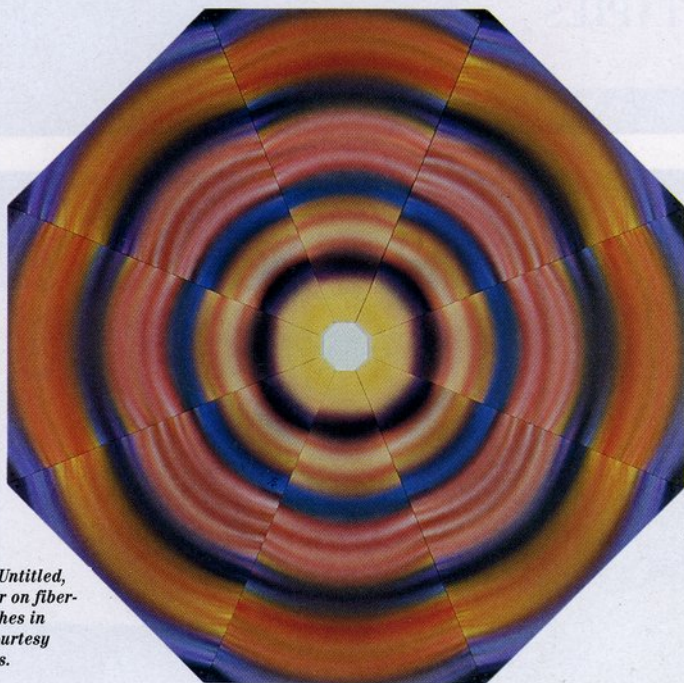
by her angular webs is the improbable result of a thoroughly consistent system of order. Rosmarin’s preparatory studies reveal that the vertical rectangle of the canvas is conceived as a grid, each square of which is a numerical matrix, three points high and three points wide. A mathematical formula provides three- or four-digit numbers that determine the points on the matrix to be connected by lines, which are all that remain in the finished painting. Rosmarin discovered her number game as a teenager and has been making paintings based on the system for 15 years. The obsessive and abstract order it delivers links her paintings to the work of Mel Bochner and Sol LeWitt rather than to that of younger models such as Peter Halley. An admirably idiosyncratic artist, Rosmarin stands apart from most of the other new abstractionists who are informed by postmodern ideas.

Joe Mancuso, another authentically abstract artist, was represented by two 6-foot tondos in “Process • Strategy • Irony.” One is a cool, smoky gray, the other a rich black. In both, narrow hand-painted concentric circles of washy acrylic are laid down from the perimeter to the center in a format reminiscent of Stella’s “Black Paintings.” Mancuso’s work, however, is organically irregular, and the circle gradually distorts to an ellipse as he works toward the center of the painting. Vertical drips check any implicit optical spin, reinforce the painting’s uprightness and open it spatially.

As a counterpoint to the atmospheric, painterly fields of Mancuso’s tondos, curator Parazette installed a single octagon by Andy Mann between them. A video artist since the early 1970s, Mann originally made paintings to be used in his videos; and the untitled 1994 painting at DiverseWorks con-



David Szafranski: Yellow and White Webbing, 1994, plastic, 22 inches square. Courtesy Eugene Binder Gallery.



Andy Mann: Untitled, 1994, lacquer on fiber-glass, 96 inches in diameter. Courtesy DiverseWorks.

Gallery in Houston rounded out the fall blitz of abstract painting in Texas. The fourth solo show by this 27-year-old painter included 19 recent canvases that embrace the dialectics of formalist abstraction, from the linear and the painterly to the systemic and the improvised. Lyon’s characteristic image is a Rorschach-like splatter of thick paint, which floats on a stained ground of contrasting color. The image’s symmetry—produced by folding the canvas when the paint is wet—and its cartoony outlines give his paintings an air of high, psychedelic comedy. Like Tad Griffin, Lyon is beginning to receive a lot of attention outside of the underground network of abstract artists in Texas.

Most of these artists know one another, and a core group is involved in a serious, on-going dialogue about the possibility of abstraction in the 1990s. At the same time, they do not constitute a movement, school or style. Above all, their ideas transcend the regionalism of previous Texas art, by responding less to the state than to a state of mind. □

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