

# Joan Witek: purity in abstract

Seldom has the Scaife Gallery seemed so compatible with exhibited art as it is now with the paintings of New York artist Joan Witek. The dark granite floors and walls of the Scaife blend strangely with her black and white paintings.

It is not too soon to think of post-minimalism, art which uses a small number of main elements to achieve impact. Witek achieves considerable power through the use of repeated forms which she calls strokes.

You have to see her drawings in Gallery I to realize that what look like ellipses (or phalluses or sausages) in her paintings are really imaginary blowups of the actual single strokes seen in her drawings.

The repeating of imagery to achieve a total composition entirely different from its units is an ancient device. It has always been popular, except for romantics like the abstract expressionists who were interested in unique gestures per artwork.

The minimalist painters working between 1964 and 1971 were trying to go beyond abstract expressionism to the purity not of gesture, but of abstract effect. Their reductivist efforts were excellent in once again reminding the public of the basic integrity of surface, edge, luminosity and texture.



Donald Miller

Just as artists are experimenting with new forms of abstract expressionism they are also investigating other more formal areas of abstraction.

Witek creates a formal purity in her work by filling her surfaces with vertical or horizontal lines that have grown from single strokes of several different kinds laid side by side in rows. Some recent paintings use horizontal layouts. Variety comes from different designs, thicknesses of strokes and presence of the white canvas between them.

The fascination in Witek is how she is able to create such variety with limited means. Being abstract, the works are not meant to have direct meaning but to be enjoyed for themselves; ideally, to create feelings in the viewer. In concentration, Witek has for nine years limited her

palette to black and white.

But in "Gardens of the Villa Medici," the large central painting in the Entrance Gallery, the viewer is clearly given an echo of the arched facade of this structure which houses the French Academy in Rome.

To know this, all you have to do is see a photograph of the villa in the January House and Garden magazine. This recognition sets up a feeling for the work that would not exist if the painting were just a pattern.

But most of Witek's work is pure pattern. In "Equivalent," 1983, recently bought by the Museum of Art, the pattern is so strong and well balanced that the first-time viewer seeing it from afar may easily think it a tapestry.

But Witek, in a fine scholarly catalog written by John Caldwell, adjunct curator of contemporary art who brought the artist to the museum's attention on the day he accepted his job here, explains her motivation.

The title "Equivalent" was to refer to the two sizes of strokes used but then the artist recalled how photographer Alfred Stieglitz called his shots of clouds by the same name; meaning they were to be equivalents to emotion, to reconcil-



*"The Return," oil and graphite on canvas, by Joan Witek.*

ing photography and abstraction.

"I wished to reconcile abstraction and feeling," Witek told Caldwell.

"People have more feelings for proportion than they know," she said. "Sexual? I never thought much

about that in my work. Our lives are becoming so abstract with technology that we have to deal increasingly with more abstract thought. People are dying to find something realistic in abstraction. But with abstraction the viewer has to be

there. It's hard."

The challenge Witek has taken on is finding a way to convey emotion *and* a kind of meaning, as in "Villa Medici," through precise design. Her exhibition continues through April 29.