

It seems to require the kind of intense pictorial jolt that Sandi Slone's new works provide to comprehend the actual status of modernist painting as practiced by the most serious artists in the late 1980s. The semiotic, linguistic, Marxist, and psychoanalytic ideologies of most recent critical discourse centering on contemporary painting either in America or in Europe have tended to conspire against the maintenance of any consensus regarding what modernism was and what, by extension, it might continue to constitute as a prime aesthetic force. Against this confusion, nothing except the undeniable force and quality of something like Sandi Slone's work is likely to prevail, either as a challenge or as a demand for more aesthetically responsive critical perspectives.

Modernist painting, as Sandi Slone's new work reconveys it (hence at least arguably calling for an updated term which I have used elsewhere, namely, "neo-modernist"), has certain fixed models and standards of expressive presentment. It does not necessarily have fixed systems or styles. For nearly forty years after 1910, Cubism was the normative model for advanced painting, alternately generating and traumatizing the most ambitious achievements in contemporary art. For nearly forty years since 1950, Jackson Pollock's work has been the new normative model, and the force of its role is nowhere more apparent than in the most confident of Sandi Slone's recent pictures, such as the almost cynically titled *Semiotic Decoration*—a very large picture which manages through the sheer comprehensiveness of its translation of glyphic markings into a laterally taut pictorial field to celebrate Pollock both inside and out.

It is the loss of critical sensitivity to the complex inside and outside of Pollock's art that has, in my judgment, largely contributed to the most simplistic and closure-seeking notions of modernism advanced over the past decade. What has been maintained is that reductivism as the singular modernist process mandatorily issues from Pollock. Viewed from the vantage point of the best abstract painting to emerge in the 1960s, there was a considerable argument based in quality progeny to support this notion, at least for a time. However, by 1975 it had become clear that the modernist content, the "inside" of



Sandi Slone, *Semiotic Decoration*, 1987. Acrylic and tar on canvas, 4 × 8'. Courtesy Stephen Rosenberg Gallery.

## SANDI SLONE

Pollock's work, was at least as compelling a normative force as its sublimely self-assured, quasi-decorative reductions. After 1975, I would argue, the complexity of aesthetic prior achievement—namely Miró's, and Klee's—that Pollock's 1949–50 work suspended in a condition of high expressive and decorative tension increasingly became the challenging modernist message of his art. To a certain extent Johns's painting had intercepted this message in the late 1950s, sublimating it in the letter and number pictures, but what really seems to have been required to convey the modernist open-end of Pollock's "inside" was the work of Hans Hofmann—a quantity more explicitly cosmopolitan than Pollock's but informed simultaneously by Pollock's historical sympathies and his Cubist antipathies.

Increasingly, Sandi Slone seems to follow Pollock from the vantage point of his contained tensions rather than his resolutions, and she does this with a conviction and confidence of purpose and with a level of pictorial accomplishment matched by an absolutely miniscule number of her contemporaries. No, she is not Pollock reborn, but she *is* Pollock passionately revisited. Rather than moving with Pollock's forward momentum, Slone moves

instead at a pace akin to Klee's—systemically rather than systematically forward. She hangs onto things that Pollock threw out in his rush to become talismanic, confessing everything pictorially that Pollock repressed.

Her seemingly narcissistic indulgence in her taste for proto-writing, for venerable Chinese vessels, for Catalan frescoes, for her own physically dense painting surfaces is more consonant with the cultivated childishness of Klee and Miró than with Pollock. So, too, is her need to oscillate in her pictorial confessions between figurative and abstract formulations of those confessions. Her unspecified, somewhat semiotic flotation of inanimate versus quasi-anthropomorphic cross signals marks her as being subject to 1980s sensitivities of both a psychological and intellectual sort, rather than to sensitivities of the 1920s or 1940s. Massive structural unpredictability is risked in picture after picture in terms of explicit, proto- or disintegrated figuration. Ultimately, it is only sensibility (or temperament in the 19th-century sense) that keeps her painting moving coherently and productively. How hard it is to work with exposed nerves rather than sublimated tensions! But Slone manages, and often magnificently.

What she has as a systemic

given is her aesthetic security in continuously or randomly dense surfaces of vermiculite and in her ability to coordinate a coloristic and graphic flow capable of pulling volume into itself—whether specified by figuration or generated through the order and disposition of glyphic markings—so that it is held momentarily and then permitted to disperse or to collect in a different way. The breadth of her color structure invariably combines in her best work with the intimacy of her drawing to produce what are often weirdly discontinuous perceptual time frames. But these discontinuities combining with the unrelenting ebb and flow of a weighted decorative field and a concomitant imbedded volumetric pulse contain Slone's expression or feeling—something enormously variable and enormously present and specific in each successive work. With room both for herself and her immense modernist painting culture, Slone has in her recent work the demonstrated competence to manage a level of aesthetic definitiveness which is virtually unique at this moment, and as in much of Pollock's most confident painting, it is signed (or signaled?) by the brash and confident glitter of coloristically resonating metallic pigments. (Stephen Rosenberg, *March 1–April 2*)

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