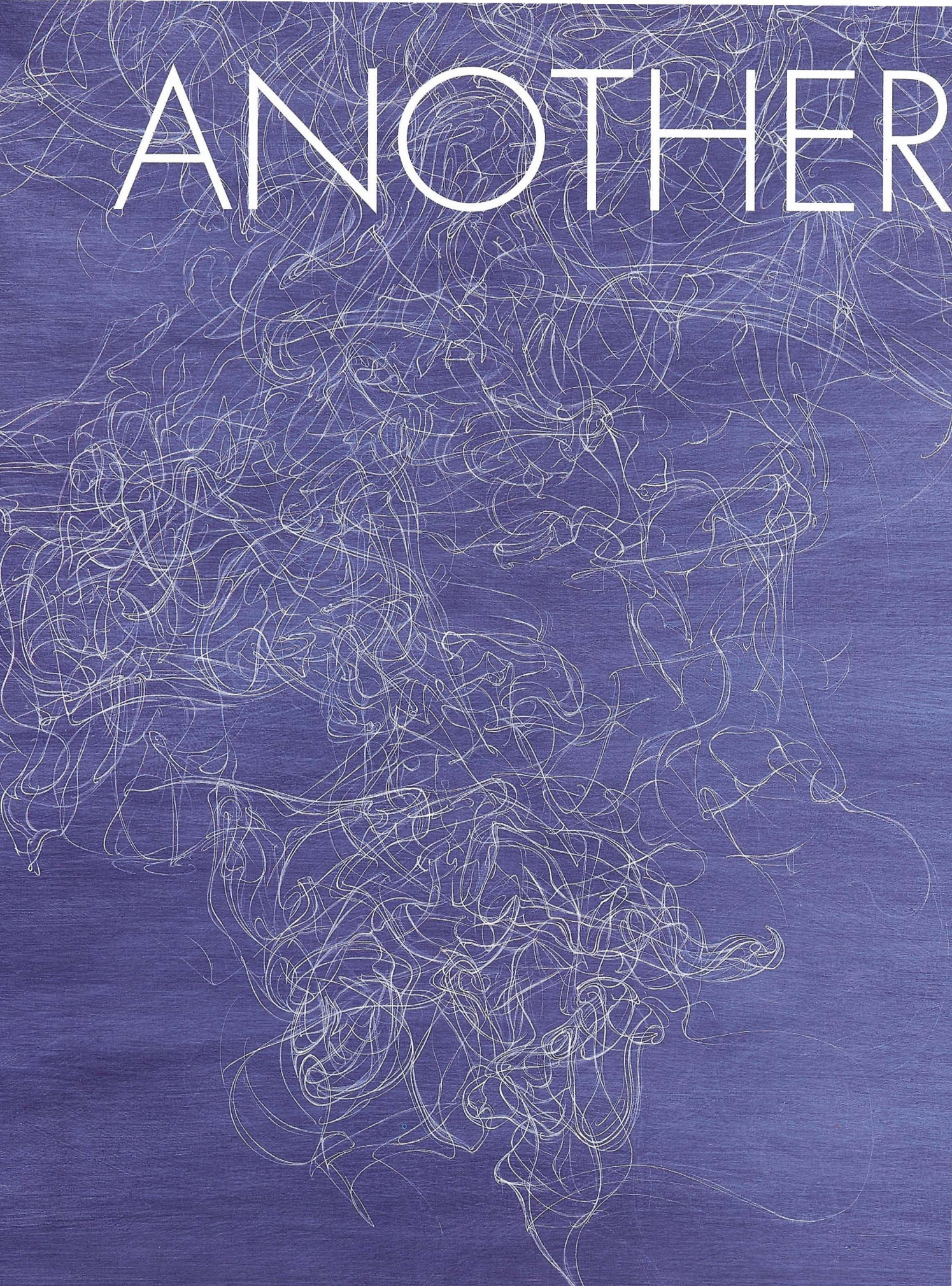


ANOTHER



WORLD

Evaluating and appreciating
abstract art.

By Edward M. Gomez

Few fields of art are as varied or, for some newcomers, as daunting as that of abstract art. But it is abstraction's multitude of styles, aspirational character and penchant for experimentation that many admirers believe are among its most rewarding attributes.

Still, some viewers may not know what to make of the seemingly formless **expanses of all-over color in the canvases** of a pioneering Abstract Expressionist like Jackson Pollock, or of the quieter, loosely architectural geometries of California painter Richard Diebenkorn. Compared to their works, brushier, gestural abstraction **may seem like a whole other school of art-making**. So can "hard-edged," geometric abstraction, whose sleek compositions of

stripes, grids or basic shapes may be inspired by mathematics or machines.

Often, abstract artists have taken a reductive approach to representing subject matter from the real world, reducing it to fundamental colors, rhythms or forms. Thus, the Romanian-born sculptor Constantin Brancusi distilled the essence of his subject in "Bird in Space" (1932–40); this classic, gently curved column of polished brass is at once subtly allusive and completely abstract. Other abstractionists have created works that are visible, tangible records of the methods by which they were made. (Pollock's drip paintings, Helen Frankenthaler's poured-paint canvases and Eva Hesse's mysterious resin and latex sculptures are examples.) Then there are painter Ellsworth Kelly's monochromatic, oddly shaped canvases and sculptor Richard Serra's massive assemblages of sheets of COR-TEN steel. Such elegant, enigmatic works are exercises in—and celebrations of—pure, proud, unembellished form.

With this wide diversity of styles and



Romanian-born Constantin Brancusi's "Bird in Space," 1923, marble, 56 3/4". Brooklyn-based Karen Arm's "Untitled (Incense #4)," 2004, acrylic on canvas, 66" x 48".

ambiguous approach to subject matter, abstract art may leave some viewers yearning to know what a work or an artist's entire oeuvre is supposed to mean. Aficionados may savor abstraction's thematic open-endedness, but others may find it an obstacle to fully understanding or enjoying a work. Even if viewers respond positively, they may still find themselves asking, "But is it any good?"

Larry Bemm's "Cusp," 2005, oil and graphite on graph paper, 8" x 11".

"It has to be emotionally charged" to be good, says Wendy Snyder, archivist of the New York-based Sam Glankoff Collection. Glankoff (1894–1982) was a member of the second generation of post-World War II, New York School Abstract Expressionists. The broad, calligraphic brushstrokes and primordial-looking motifs that characterize his monoprints gave them an eloquent, monumental air. "I've seen a lot of abstraction for abstraction's sake," Snyder says. "Good abstract art has an unmistakable sense

of depth and power you can feel."

"Sometimes it's just a mood that a work generates and which captivates a viewer," says New York dealer Kimberly Venardos of abstract art's unnamable appeal. Venardos shows works by contemporary abstract painters and encounters newcomers to this kind of art all the time. "Although many abstract artists do refer to forms from nature in the colors, shapes or patterns they employ, I let clients know this art is wide open to interpretation."

That openness is reflected in the fact





Detail of Jon Waldo's "Henry the Navigator," 2004, oil and acrylic on canvas, 48" x 60", and "Seven Years of Scrabble," 2004, 60" x 40".

that, decades after Abstract Expressionism's apotheosis in the emblematic canvases of such legendary figures as Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, artists, art historians and the public continue to explore the language of abstraction with curiosity and passion. The ongoing interest in this art is a testament to its expressive power and enduring allure. For collectors, these trends may signal that well-chosen pieces marked by innovative techniques, compelling themes or the emotional power Snyder finds so irresistible will grow in value over time. (A work's title can provide clues to its intended historical, literary or other references.)

"Viewers bring something to the work, too," says Brooklyn, New York-based painter Karen Arm, whose

monochromatic tableaux may be read, up close, as abstracted depictions of billowing smoke or agglomerations of shimmering stars. Abstract painting, she notes, is "its own world; it's about the process of painting itself, as opposed to realist painting, which a viewer can compare to a known subject."

Jon Waldo, whose canvases mix stenciled line drawings of everyday objects with all-over eddies of spaghetti-like brushstrokes, says, "With abstract art, you create your own realities. Something about it can be very spiritual, too." That soulful quality, which is often associated with more overtly religious art, is a reflection, many abstract-art admirers believe, of the transcendent power of an abstract work's raw creative energy or of its pure and exultant color or form. Therein lies an aesthetic payoff, one that chilly, more

polemic postmodernist art forms cannot always deliver.

In recent years, certain trends have been noticeable in the broad abstract-art field. Art experts and general audiences alike have been drawn back to the dizzyly geometric Op Art of the 1960s and to minimalist sculpture of the 1970s. Today, too, some artists are routinely incorporating found or recycled materials into abstract works. Others are experimenting with older techniques like encaustic, a method of painting with hot wax. At the same time, regional museums, which are often located on college or university campuses, have been presenting some noteworthy abstract art exhibitions; in many instances, such shows have been drawn primarily from their own permanent collections. New Jersey's Montclair Art Museum, for example, houses a large





collection of the Synchronist painter Morgan Russell's art. And the Menil Collection in Houston has special buildings housing monumental canvases by Rothko and Cy Twombly.

Newcomers to the field soon discover that the literature on abstract art is vast. In recent years, too, revisionist art historians have re-examined the standard way in which modernism's story has been told. Looking at the broader social and cultural conditions in which abstract art forms emerged, they have highlighted such overlooked artists as Janet Sobel, who was self-taught, and Norman Lewis, an African-American who worked with the WPA in the 1930s. Dealers like New York's Gary Snyder, who specialize in such lesser-known modernists, have also made significant contributions to this revisionist research effort. (Works by such still-emerging, long-deceased artists often are more affordable than those by abstract art's legendary superstars. More of it may be available, too.)

Even now, drawings, prints and works on paper by lesser-known artists can provide low-cost opportunities to start building collections. (See Pierogi's Flat Files online for the works of such emerging artists as Carey Maxon.) By contrast, mixed-media works and large sculptures can be challenging to install or conserve, but some abstract-art lovers welcome the dramatic presence such pieces can command.

Where does one find abstract art's freshest talents? Besides commercial gallery shows, exhibitions like the Brooklyn Museum's recent "Open House: Working in Brooklyn" feature abstract art aplenty. Among this big survey's finds: Korean-born Eung Ho Park's grid of painted bottle caps mounted on board; Danielle Tegeder's

Up-and-coming artist Carey Maxon's "The High," 2003, ink, graphite and watercolor on paper, 30" x 40".