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Art

Zen and Perceptual Hiccups

A show surveys the mysterious paintings of Robert Moskowitz

By ROBERT HUGHES

Along with Susan Rothenberg, Joel Shapiro, Neil Jenney and a few others, the painter Robert Moskowitz usually gets credited with bringing figurative imagery back into "advanced" art at the end of the 1970s. Whether you think this true depends on where you were looking. In fact, serious figurative art never went away—it just got hammered out of fashion by minimalism, the last great American style, in whose reductive embrace Moskowitz grew up just as it was coming to an impasse. As for "advanced," who gives a damn anymore? But no matter: Moskowitz's current exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City (on view through April 24) contains some admirable paintings, even if the run-up to them is gradual.

Moskowitz, 54, was a slow developer, and has remained a decidedly uneven artist. But he never fell into the ghastly Warhol ethos that gelded so many talents in the '80s. The show starts with early collages involving paper bags and window blinds, pale elegant things haunted by Jasper Johns. It proceeds through a prolix series of paintings from the '60s that depict the corner of an imaginary "ideal" and utterly banal room with no furniture in it, done in very close-valued colors that turn the image into a benign parody of Ad Reinhardt's black paintings. Odd little signs—a blurt of pigment here, a "Have a Nice Day" face there—float in front of the room. You get the impression that Moskowitz, who has been a Zen student most of his adult life, is repeating a sort of koan without giving the slightest clue to its meaning.

The same mild frustration is built into his even more spaced-out images from the '70s, in which legible but quite unrelated signs for things float on a field of color in a way that very distantly recalls Miró. *Cadillac/Chopsticks*, 1975, is just what it says: the rear-half profile of a '60s Caddy, bulbous with fins, and in the lower right a red X depicting a pair of chopsticks. Nothing else. One is not much helped by the otherwise useful catalog essay of Ned Rifkin, to whom, it seems, Moskowitz "revealed that the Cadillac might represent Hollywood glamour and the car culture of the West Coast, while the chopsticks could allude to a New Yorker's love of Chinese food." No kidding. This, you could say, looks like art history at the end of its rope.

Things firm up toward the '80s. The picture that changed Moskowitz's style was *Swimmer*, 1977, a canvas bearing the head and raised arm of a figure in the sea. This figure is quite an abstract form, and it is embedded, heraldically, in a dark field of Prussian blue. From now on Moskowitz's work would look for strong, immediately recognizable icons that were submerged into abstraction by their elaborate, nondescriptive surfaces. They combine frankness of silhouette with loss of detail, and the effect is mysterious and poignant.

LA JOLLA MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

RED MILL, *1981*

Moskowitz's best work depicts strong, immediately recognizable icons submerged into abstraction. He has an unaffected appetite for the sublime. Just as clearly, he doubts if sublimity can be revived.

He is fascinated by large enduring things: monuments of the relatively recent past such as the Empire State Building and the Flatiron Building in New York; old practical forms like a windmill, a smokestack or a lighthouse; or things that have acquired a sort of timelessness as artistic stereotypes, like Myron's *Discobolos* or Rodin's *The Thinker*. But few of them are immediately recognizable, and they all derive from other kinds of art, including photography. The looming profile of Moskowitz's Flatiron Building comes from Edward Steichen's famous gray-silhouetted photo of that structure, made almost three-quarters of a century before; *Thinker* begins with another moody Steichen photograph. But because the shape of the Flatiron Building is so close in value to its background, black on black, it induces a perceptual hiccup, like stepping off a step that is not there; for a moment you do not know whether you are looking at something abstract or not, and even when you have seen the building, the abstractness remains.

Moskowitz's vividly imposing red windmill alludes to Mondrian's great early paintings of that motif. The side of the Yosemite cliff in *The Seventh Sister*, 1981, recalls Clyfford Still and, through that, the American Romantic tradition of heroic landscape. Such works do not escape the secondhandedness that comes with quoted images, but at least they are quite without smug prophylactic irony.

Moskowitz's roots lie in abstract expressionism: he studied with Adolf Gottlieb and married Jack Tworkov's daughter. His paintings clearly show that he feels the loss of the pristine Romantic tradition. He has an unaffected appetite for the sublime and its subjects: towers, cliffs, icebergs and heroes (even if we see only the backside of the discobolus, even though the thing in his hand looks more like a bowling ball than a discus). Just as clearly, he doubts if sublimity can be revived. His rendering of a Giacometti sculpture into a long, ghostly streak of thick white pigment on a black ground is poignant for this reason; it catches an artist in the act of wondering whether Giacometti's painful authenticity is culturally possible anymore. In this way, Moskowitz's better paintings become icons of loss and constraint, even when their making seems most involved and obsessive. ■