

Art in America

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

Robert Moskowitz: *Diver*, 2003, oil on canvas, 78 by 41 1/2 inches; at Peter Blum.



Robert Moskowitz at Peter Blum

This exhibition included paintings and works on paper from the last two years, plus two paintings from the 1990s. The paintings, oils on canvas, were large, and the paper works, also done in oil, were more painted than drawn. Following his inclusion in the "New Image Painting" exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 1978, Moskowitz became widely known for his large monochromatic paintings with prominent, recognizable subjects. People, animals and buildings are often given iconic treatment in his work, and all were featured in this exhibition.

Moskowitz first painted the Twin Towers in 1978, making of them an archetypal modernist emblem. He tackled the subject again in *Skyscraper* (1995), an 11-foot-high diptych included in this show. The painting is typical of Moskowitz in its use of monumentality, its ambiguity of representation and abstraction, and its fine attention to texture. The white monoliths of the towers are almost negative spaces, while the black surrounding them is luxuriously, expressively painted. *Empire State* (2004) presents a stark black silhouette of the famous landmark against a featureless white sky with an ominous black cloud or shadow impinging. The suppression of detail causes the stepped facade of the building to read like forbidding ridges or dangerous protective fins.

The exhibition featured two significant series: the first, "Diver," based on a fresco from a museum of Greek art in Paestum, Italy, marks variations on a diver's plummet through immense space; the second, an untitled selection of works on paper, depicts birds in flight with a simplicity similar to that used in the paintings of buildings. Moskowitz has been spending large amounts of time each year in Italy since 2002 and has allowed imagery from the classical world to enter his work. The Paestum diver is a tomb decoration believed to signify the passage of the soul from this world to the next. In Moskowitz's four diver paintings, the image retains some of this symbolic nature, but the meaning is refracted both by Moskowitz's taking the image through variations and by the striking opacity he gives both the black figure of the diver and the bright yellow and red monochrome backgrounds. His subtle additions of geometric forms and his squaring off of the figure's edges

contribute to a somewhat clinical quality that partially takes the figure out of a referential context. Moskowitz plays with the position of the diver's body relative to the picture frame, which changes his implied arc of descent, and he uses the figure to comment on the picture's edge, which usually bisects the figure. He has brought the image into the present while preserving its mystery.

In the five bird drawings, by contrast, the birds stay approximately the same size—small in relation to the frame—while the sky undergoes dramatic transformations. At first the black, indeterminate shapes appear to stand for clouds, while the white of the paper stands for sky, and a grim atmosphere is evinced. The black shapes do not always look exactly like clouds, however, and they begin to take on more metaphysical readings, as ominous, undefined shapes. While Moskowitz continues to be drawn to stark imagery, his work is evolving in fresh ways, inspired partially by technical invention, as in the bird drawings, and partially by access to ancient motifs, revealed in the "Diver" series. —Vincent Katz