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Smith, Roberta.: *Art in Review; Mark Grotjahn*

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By **Roberta Smith**

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Correction Appended

Whitney Museum of American Art 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street Through Jan. 7

Some younger painters seem to be countering the strictures of late Modernism by revisiting the early Modernist cusp between abstraction and representation, an area that includes Mondrian's flower paintings, Jawlensky's masks and Malevich's robotlike peasants, where the figurative, the geometric, the spatial and the visionary still remain tangled. There they seek paths not taken, tangents not explored. That their searches have not been in vain is evidenced by work as varied as that of Tomma Abts, Wade Guyton, Eileen Quinlan, Sergei Jensen, Cheyney Thompson and a host of others, including the Los Angeles painter Mark Grotjahn.

Mr. Grotjahn, who is 38, makes slightly obstreperous paintings of faces and flowers, as well as the thick-surfaced pinwheel abstractions for which is he becoming best known. In these, closely related colors radiate out from a central vertical band, creating a straight-edged butterfly effect that is destabilized by the use of two or more vanishing points. Together these elements can create the sensation of a distant light exploding at the center of the image even if the painting is largely monochromatic.

Two such works got a bit lost in the shuffle at last spring's Whitney Biennial, but now Mr. Grotjahn has filled the museum's ground floor gallery with 8 brash door-size color pencil drawings from a series of 13.

Some stick to the monochrome, as in several nocturnal black-on-black works full of shadowy contrasts. Others that fan outward in clattery Op Art black-white contrasts have more bark and bite, including one where this tonal combination softens to a visionary buzz. Elsewhere black is contrasted with spokes of red, orange and brown, or the fiery colors take over completely.

In this work the pinwheel or butterfly composition is doubled and further complicated by being steeply angled sideways, exposing big wedges of white paper and stressing the perspectival loopiness. The drawn elements seem to fold and wheel in space, like two big, off-register charts of the Big Bang placed on end. It is interesting to see Mr. Grotjahn abandon the shieldlike heraldic frontality that has characterized his work so far. After all, something has got to give, or his pinwheels will start functioning as emblems for himself, like a Kenneth Noland target painting.

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