

One of the major problems of contemporary art discourse is that the standard model of the conceptual split between abstraction and representation in painting has long outlived its usefulness and we really don't know what to replace it with. There is a difference, to be sure, but it has become difficult to pin down what it is. Consider the loose grid structures that organize Andrea Belag's paintings. Urban spaces have decreed a loosened grid as an image of the life world. Belag infuses the window and street spaces her stacked and crossed bands imply with colors redolent of light from the skies of late afternoon and early evening, and also incandescently lit interiors looking out at the end of the day. We think of Hopper, of course, and the Hudson River School and remember: New York is a Hudson River city. Belag lives on the lower west side, near the water, and sees the red sun setting behind the river, blocked and framed by the shadows of buildings and overpasses. Horizontal bands of cloud are yellow, grey, red, and violet. The river's silver is cut by still more bands of deep shadow from a ferry's wake. And here comes the great shadowy beam of a slow moving barge. There is honking traffic and the smell of gasoline and cooking. Vapors honey the light.

But these are abstract paintings, projected into the vaulted modern spaces that house Rothko, Kline, Diebenkorn, Martin, and Marden. Belag's art holds its own in this company and illuminates it from the backward glance of a younger generation's high beams. From the perspective of Belag's paintings we can again appreciate the open associations of place inhabiting Diebenkorn's Ocean Park meditations and Kline's wintry, collapsing architectures. And we'll ponder the memory of light in Rothko's

Cloud(s) of Unknowing, the physicality of Marden's drawing with seasonal color and the way it holds light as volume, the breathing of light and the wave-like pulses residing within Martin's relative "purity."

The life of the world impresses itself upon the senses and goes behind them, or sinks underneath, so that sense memory mingles with other indicators of evolving identity to be converted to intuitions about deep structure and deep feeling. The repetitions in Belag's painting process, her material engagement with paint as a fluid body draped and pushed by

her own physical exertions, ripen such intuitions into a language whose metier, really, is energy. The vectors of city life are given a momentary stability, and the striated light of a day's end is encrypted into an enduring pattern. Light is energy made visible, matter is energy given weight, and structure is energy organized. Painting houses this display in an object that is, itself, a body and an extension into the very architecture that displays and houses it. Only a high level of realization in painting binds these apprehensions as a gestalt. Belag's paintings succeed for me at this level.

Painters sometimes turn to abstraction in an attempt to keep things open and simple so that we can read more into it rather than less. This is the metaphysic of abstraction that moves me the most and it appears to be the motivation in Belag's painting, which is deeply shaded by feeling, yet simple, supple, and extendable.

Stephen Westfall  
New York, 2000