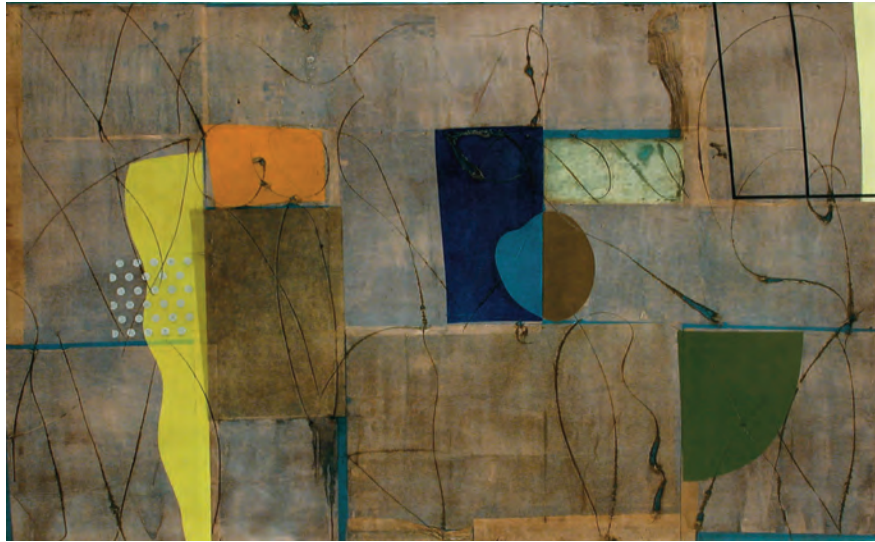


Art in America

January 2004



Michel Alexis: *Subtracted Word #9*, 2003, oil and mixed mediums on canvas, 48 x 78 inches; at Stephen Haller Gallery

Michel Alexis at Stephen Haller

Michel Alexis is a French-born, New York-based painter with a penchant for lyrical abstraction. His oil-and-mixed-medium paintings are full of delicate surprises that, on second viewing, are more assertive than the viewer might have originally thought. His gently curving, thin lines hold the viewer's attention with their sensuality, and his squares and rectangles of color build up compositions notable for their balance and integrity. Alexis's process communicates his pleasure in a more or less musical arrangement of elements - color and line are assembled with a subtle awareness of the differences of their effects that makes them nearly readable, much as one might read the music for a string quartet. The effects are often symbolic in nature, communicating a dense complexity.

Alexis begins by painting a background color and then mounting thin sheets of handmade paper on the canvas. His considerable investment in drawing gives the individual works their aura of subtle poetry, often enhanced by curving incisions, arabesques that spiral out and across

the compositional field. In *Epigram #32* (2003), a central yellow passage, flanked by squares and rectangles of darker colors, has a curving stripe on it, along with thin lines that activate the larger space.

Other works by Alexis are as elegant as this one. In *Subtracted Word #5* (2003), a vertical arrangement of colorful rectangles and squares is built up on a washed gray-brown ground. The mystery of the painting is considerable; it is as if the artist has worked out a primal language of abstraction that makes sense on an intuitive level. And in *Subtracted Word #9* (2003), the different forms in the composition - circles, squares, and more complex parallelograms - offer a tableau of abstract shapes against a dark-gray background. A private, deeply personal idiom stands out because of its moody intensity.

--Jonathan Goodman