

Michel Alexis

STEPHEN HALLER

French artist Michel Alexis's large new abstract canvases are characteristically set against a subtle gridlike structure and employ a range of earth tones, linear abstract forms, and fabric and collage pieces.

In *N*, for example, amid haphazardly pieces-together forms and tones, we can see half of a pale yellow heart, cut off by the bottom edge of the canvas, and two intersecting loops, one red, one blue. They seem to hover over the painted ground, as if most of the painting were inhabiting a plane behind the floating forms. Alexis very effectively pulls us into his world of personal symbols and communicates the work's shifting moods.

Fe offered a more lively departure from the generally muted palette of the exhibition. Here, atop a base of pale creams, are bright-colored, Matisse-like cutouts, each suggesting a hermetic sign. A curved yellow triangle abuts a striped square that sits on a larger, turquoise square. A cobalt blue half-guitar shape dangles in a sea of beige canvas layers etched with curving lines. The effect is somewhat reminiscent of Richard Diebenkorn. And, like Diebenkorn's paintings, Alexis's are airy and exuberant, speaking clearly in a nonobjective idiom.

Alexis's visually complicated *O* is a masterful work, showing him at his best. Here sepia tones veil a ground of wrinkled, layered segments of cloth. Pink pigment bleeds along the top of the picture. Defining the canvas, surprisingly, are two shapes: a fluttering yellow flag form that appears to float at the top of the painting and a thick turquoise spiral shape



Michel Alexis, *O*, 2002, Mixed media on canvas, 68 x 48 inches

set at the lower right. The cleanly rendered lines of the curve contrast sharply with the painting's nuanced surface. It is a bold symbol that shakes the gentle balance of the grid. Alexis's strongest works incorporate unexpected elements, like the turquoise spiral, which create the surface tension essential to animating his abstract voice.

--Mary Schneider Enriquez