

ARTS & LETTERS

The Fine Art of Surface Attention

By JOHN GOODRICH
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It's a truism that every painting is really a self-portrait. This applies, in fact, just as much to abstractions as to representational paintings. Currently, shows of work by two abstract painters reflect the profound differences in their intentions and insights.

At Stephen Haller, Ron Ehrlich's 10 panels are listed as multimedia works, but this description hardly prepares one for the turbulent surfaces that combine oil paint, oil stick, wax, shellac, varnish, and the odd fragment or two of wood. (For good measure, Mr. Ehrlich applies a blowtorch in places, lending his surfaces a weathered, grainy texture.) As with Clyfford Still, Mr. Ehrlich's images are arenas of turgid textures, but Ehrlich's strokes are far more violent, with intense hues imparting a melodramatic depth. His gestures of paint — variously crusted, flooding, slathered, and scraped — seem constrained by only one tradition: a painting's flat, rectangular support.

In the late '70s, the artist moved to Japan for five years, where he studied traditional ceramics. This experience resonates in titles such as "Koke" (2006), which refers to an ancient Japanese temple. In this square panel, gray washes drizzle over a background of clotted, lumpy off-whites, lending it the amorphous atmosphere of a landscape scroll painting. More typical, however, is "Shifting Web" (2007), in which a great slash of white, extending corner to corner, cleaves a zone of brilliant, burning red from areas of layered washes admitting glimpses of curling underdrawing.

Mr. Ehrlich's attack is foremost a tactile one. He animates his images more often through varieties of textures than with hierarchies of forms. I found myself resisting the seductive paint handling in the large "The Taste of Self" (2006), which, despite its highly evoca-



Ron Ehrlich, *Shifting Web* (2007)
STEPHEN HALLER GALLERY

tive, varied surface, features more or less equally weighted areas of sienna, ochre, and gray. More dynamic formally is the smaller "Shunyata" (2007), in which wide swathes of off-white, covering nine-tenths of the surface, press upon a mottled purple at the lower edge; A few drips of amber varnish wander delicately down the panel's entire height, like butterflies through a minefield. Here one savors not just pronouncements but an interior conversation, with actions and reactions, gambits and repercussions.

Best of all is "Wheat" (2007), which, contrary to its title, suggests an eruption of fireworks. Its ragged diagonals and verticals divide an exotic Turner-esque space of heated orange-reds, leaden grays, and acrid blues shades. Effects abound — dashes of light and murky depths — and, crucially, they coalesce in movements leading from introductory gleamings, to boisterous collisions, and a distant release. It's a memorable light show.

Until April 10 (542 W. 26th St between
Tenth & Eleventh avenues, 212-741-7777)