

LARRY ZOZ: FIVE DECADES

Stephen Haller Gallery
542 26th Street
New York 10001
212-741-7777

February 26 to April 5, 2005

By REUBEN M. BARON



Larry Zox **Green Diamond Drill: Keokuk** 1968
acrylic on canvas, 80 x 64 inches
Courtesy Stephen Haller Gallery

One of the down sides of the Greenbergian formalism in the 1960s was its insufficient appreciation of how the energy and aggression, first of the Civil Rights movement and then the anti-Vietnam War protests, may have infiltrated the art of the period. While this synthesis of reductive art and aggressive energy is perhaps more apparent in non-painterly pursuits such as the complex, geometric sculpture of Barry Le Va (good examples of which can be found in the current survey of his work at the ICA in Philadelphia through April 3, 2005), I would like to argue that a similar, if more low key, synthesis can be found in a range of Larry Zox's works

currently on view at the Stephen Haller Gallery in Chelsea. There is perhaps a rough correspondence between Le Va's broken plates of glass and Zox's broken planes of color. Each artist creates a broken geometry that releases an energy that encourages the viewer to do more than meditate as his or her responsive eye becomes embodied. It is this energy that I

propose gives the edge to the dynamic, hard-edge paintings of Larry Zox. This edgy energy manifests itself in the way the color field is split into angular color areas separated by canvas channels, the earliest example in this exhibition being the splendid “Diagonal I” (1965). Despite this separation, the colors interact dynamically as they try to complete the broken geometries; triangles and polygons trying to reconstitute themselves create a color field under tension. Further tension is created by Zox’s ability to juggle both sour and sweet colors—orange, red, yellow, green, purple and unnamable blues vie for attention. These spatial and color dynamics are jointly present in “Green Diamond Drill: Keokuk” (1968), perhaps the most realized single work in this survey. And then there are the wonderful blacks. It is black that I propose that enables Zox to orchestrate color combinations that, in the best works, are simultaneously hot and cool as in jazz. Indeed, these interlocking units of color achieve the kind of shared rhythm we experience with a good dance partner. But this is no waltz; it is the era’s twist in all its funky joy.



Larry Zox **Scissor Jack for Jean** 1965
 acrylic on canvas, 90 x 138 inches
 Courtesy Stephen Haller Gallery

More generally, Zox’s “tough love” color-field formats whether they be in the Diamond Drill, Rotation, Scissors Jack, or Diamond Cut series, more than hold their own with competing color field painters, be they Stella, Olitski, Frankenthaler, Noland or Dzubas. These so-called Post-Painterly Abstraction painters look soft and “pretty” compared to Zox’s best work such as “Green Diamond Drill: Keokuk” (1968), Diamond Cut series (1966) or “Scissor Jack for Jean” (1965).

Indeed, looking a fresh at these works and seeing the “Protractor” paintings of Frank Stella from the same general mid-to-late 60’s period (currently at Jacobson-Howard (March/April, 2005) and Kasmin (through March 26, 2005), Zox’s paintings hold up better. They are less decorative and hermetic; they are more dynamic both pictorially and in terms of being better attuned to the energy of the period. As, however, Zox becomes interested in seeing color in more puristic terms, the energy literally flags. First, slowly in the Gemini series, then more quickly in the static but coloristically beautiful color-field works of the early 70s (not included in this show). Zox temporarily appears to lose his color compass in works such as Weshcubb (1993). Here the drawing elements interfere with the color field interactions. The good news, however, is that in the most recent Zox painting in the exhibition, “Algonkin I” (2004), color and line have begun once more to work well together.

Whether the new work can match the best of Zox’s work from the mid-to-late 60s may, however, be besides the point. In the sixties, Zox achieved a brilliant synthesis of form, line and color that transcended the softness of Greenbergian Post-Painterly Abstraction. In effect, Zox reached back to the rhythmic geometrics of Mondrian’s “Broadway Boogie Woogie”, adding to Mondrian a dazzling array of color pyrotechnics.