

LOS ANGELES

Denise Gale at Newspace

Naivete and passion having a way of resembling each other, I can't say for sure which is the mainspring of Denise Gale's neo-Action paintings, but my first response is positive, or anyway a species of Why Not! In this year of the shocking deaths of Rosenberg and Hess, and of de Kooning's triumphal old age, the *geist* of Abstract Expressionism seems to draw tantalizingly near. Moreover, who can say we aren't in for the renewal of a ten-year cycle: late '40s, the Golden Age; late '50s, the peak confidence of the Second Generation; late '60s, the revivalism of Lyrical Abstraction. It does seem that through periods of decadence and ruthless sublimation the idea—one might say the archetype—of Abstract Expressionist painting keeps up a steady pressure, and it's not surprising that every now and then eager young artists should try to reify it, if only to bring a whiff of that old creative and moral excitement into the stagnant present.

Gale is 29. Her celebrations of spontaneity and risk are methodically prepared for. She paints unstretched on the floor, staining her canvases (6 to 9 feet on their long sides) one usually pale color, and roughly indicating the edge with another, darker color. From then on it's all feverish smash and spatter, swatches and gobs of acrylic applied with all sorts of instruments, usually in layers, one color at a time. The overlapped compositions are kept relatively open, giving the gestures—which are often big, obviously involving the painter's whole body—plenty of elbow room and creating an illusion of shallow, active depths. One senses a reckless absorption in the act of painting, a braving of chaos, that in the best instances is giddily intense.

Gale's color combinations tend to be at once as deliberate as an interior decorator's and almost perversely outlandish; for instance, magenta, chartreuse, black and white—reading the layers from top to bottom—on a gray brown ground. The combinations suggest an eccentric but serious playfulness, as if the artist were consciously challenging herself, exacerbating her own sensibilities. In one painting, a wine red ground supports layers of light and neutral tones of ever filmier and feebler presence, the sugary morass nailed down, snapped to attention, at the last by globs of a harsh green verging on black. The painting succeeds, and my sense of how close it came to flopping makes me want to cheer.



Denise Gale: Untitled, 1978, acrylic on canvas, 8 by 9 feet; at Newspace.

For me, the same goes for Gale's work in general. It's a joyous enterprise conducted on the edge of an abyss, maybe even, as in a *Roadrunner* cartoon, out over the edge. (The coyote is okay so long as he doesn't look down.) All that supports it, really, is one's belief, and maybe the artist's own, in her sincerity, in the emotional and not merely esthetic necessity of the colors and gestural forms. Sincerity as an ideal has been all but factored out of art discourse in favor of more objective-sounding and impersonal concepts (as if there's anything the least bit objective about "authenticity" or, for heaven's sake, "quality"!), but like Romanticism, which elevated it as a value, it never completely goes away. I believe that even in the most questionable forms and circumstances, and despite its obvious risks of mindlessness and bathos (or worse), sincerity remains the indispensable element of any art that stands a chance of carrying an original, and not just an accidental or culturally assigned, meaning into the future. Therefore I respond strongly to the appearance of Denise Gale, even as I am aware of the limitations, perils and partial artificiality of her chosen style, and also that a lot of similar intentions have come to bitter disappointment in recent years.

—Peter Schjeldahl