

Keepers of the Faith

After a decade of chic, abstract painters pick up the pieces

Abstract painting barely survived the '80s. Once the most profound and inventive medium in modern art, it's been on the skids since the heyday of abstract expressionism in the 1950s. Pop art's hipness forced it into academic formulas in the '60s; when the '70s gave equal credence to everything from earthworks to photo realism, it became just another flaccid, personal-feeling indulgence. And the sleek, big-money "appropriation" styles of the past decade drove it back into the caves of neglect. Lately the mode has seemed like a quaint, nostalgic ritual, practiced only by the art-world equivalent of Druids.

But as the art historical odometer turns over another zero in this midwinter drear, two New York exhibitions prove that paint-on-picture-plane, with almost no graven imagery, can still be powerful stuff. English-born John Walker, 50, one of abstract painting's flame keepers through the troubled times, weighs in uptown (at Knoedler & Co. through Feb. 1) with heroically sized paintings that recall both the muscularity of Franz Kline and the grand ambition of Barnett Newman. And at Soho's Mary Boone Gallery (through Jan. 27), Moira Dryer, 30, displays militantly modest pictures which try to blend chic postmodernism with sincere, straightforward abstraction.

The ray of hope offered by these shows is further brightened by other painters (absent for the moment from gallery walls) who are managing to keep the same faith. Out in Los Angeles, Karen Carson, 45, puts "impossible" architectural space into abstract paintings whose somberness is untypical of southern California. Chicago's Judy Geichman, 45, compacts a daunting amount of organic energy into her spacious canvases. And again in New York, where the fate of abstract painting is most acutely on the line, Louise Fishman, 51, composes darkly quiet abstractions which reaffirm that contemporary art is more than a brute



COURTESY KNOEDLER & CO.

Brushwork that is so matter-of-fact as to be daring: Walker's 'Untitled' (1989)

contest between uninventive conservatism and glib novelty.

Way up on East 70th Street—nosebleed altitude for the downtown crowd—Walker's frontal, combative paintings bravely counter the gallery's courtly ambience. With the reappearing shape of a forge

(sometimes it's a 10-ton object, sometimes just a ghost) and an industrial-strength, big-brush calligraphy, Walker stands up for good ol'-fashioned painting without actually being old-fashioned. His secret is to disguise nothing and admit everything. The blunt bisymmetry of a huge untitled painting (1989) is openly declared, instead of hidden away under secondary shapes. The brushwork in all of his current pictures is so matter-of-fact as to be daring. And, while there's little one can *point* to as derivative, Walker subtly acknowledges his debts to such diverse influences as Joan Miró and the earlier English abstractionist Alan Davie. Walker's paintings are devoid of the perfumy colors endemic to weaker abstraction. (Twenty years ago he was one of the best full-palette colorists around, but he's forgone that for Dutch landscapeish greens, blacks and tans.)

The show has its missteps. "The Forge" (1989) reverts to Old Master melodrama, and an afterthought row of miniature figurative studies demonstrates only that Walker knows something about his countryman, Constable. Still, the exhibition has a visceral integrity. Like Henry Breasley,



TOM VAN EYNDE

Chicago energy: Geichman's 'Angel Dance' (1987)

the sensual expatriate painter in John Fowles's novella "The Ebony Tower," Walker admonishes the dry theoreticians of geometric abstraction (recently revived as Neo-Geo, a fey mini-style of the '80s) that good painting is usually fleshy painting.

Snide comfort: Dryer, on the other hand, could be a Breasley villain. She's keenly aware that abstract painting's rambunctious innocence went out with the Model A, and supremely conscious that these days every brushstroke is automatically overloaded with art-historical reference. But where many of her generation of artists have fled to the snide comfort of parody, Dryer attempts the most difficult trick of all: creating a truly new visual beauty. Her method is to flirt with, but not succumb to, irony—that panacea for all who fear that everything original has already been done. In her small paintings (46 inches by 48 inches is a typical size), Dryer's surfaces are kept vulnerably matte, her compositions restricted mostly to stripes and streaks, and her one-two color schemes re-



COURTESY MARY BOONE GALLERY

Aware of the overload: Dryer's 'Headline' (1989)

alized just a shade more intensely than stains. Few younger painters have the nerve to make their statements simply and exit without fussing; hardly any of those who do can match the sour, offhanded prettiness of the swampy "Headline" (1989) or the fuzzy, scallop-edged giddiness of "Picture Perfect II" (1989).

Not all Dryer's gambles, however, are won. "Old Vanity" (1989), for example,

adds a blank steel plaque beneath its painted panel. The gimmick's effect is to take a sweetly tough painting and turn it into a Duchampian pun on museum labels. And the show's sparse installation (seven paintings spread through two pretty big rooms) tries a little too hard to extract profundity from austerity. It's like trying to gussy up a book of Wallace Stevens poetry with elegant type and wide page margins.

But the paintings of both Dryer and Walker invite such picayune criticism only because they so honestly question—and almost always reject—every easy, decorative out open to them. This is art unconcerned with bravado technique and glossy finish. It's for acquired tastes, for viewers predisposed to the philosophical issues surrounding abstraction near the end of the century. Does such painting, for instance, make visible the hidden forces of the universe, or is it merely a temporary escape from the real world? Whatever their contributions to an answer to this question, these shows and artists at least indicate an exit from the nihilistic cuteness of a great deal of '80s art. In a cold, postmodernist January, that's a lot to be thankful for.

PETER PLAGENS

Cash on the Barrelhead

Van Gogh called himself "a poor bungler who can't sell a picture." He might have cut off his other ear had he known that one of his pictures, "Irises," would be sold at auction by Sotheby's for \$53.9 million. The record sale in November 1987 to Australian brewing tycoon Alan Bond was made possible by a \$27 million loan extended by the giant auction house, with the painting itself used as collateral. The widespread criticism that such a practice drives up art prices has now led Sotheby's to modify its lending policies. Sotheby's head Michael Ainslie puts it this way: "We won't lend against things we're selling until they've been purchased and owned for at least 90 days. You can't sit in the auction room thinking you can borrow against it from us. You must sit there thinking you are going to pay for it."

Ainslie said the change in

policy was made in response to public "perception" that such financing could inflate bidding, "even though we don't believe that perception is accurate." But it also comes at a time when Bond, whose business empire is on the brink of financial ruin, still owes Sotheby's millions of dollars on his loan. Though "Irises" had been hanging in Bond's Perth offices, by last September Sotheby's had removed it to storage, reportedly in Switzerland, until the final payments were made. The beer baron—whose debts total about \$5 billion and who is facing immediate demands from creditors of \$510 million—is "entertaining offers" for the painting, says Ainslie. But don't expect a fire-sale price: according to The ARTnewsletter, Bond and his advisers figure that "Irises" is now worth about \$65 million.

Whatever the fate of "Iris-



Don't expect a fire-sale price: Van Gogh's 'Irises'

es," critics charge that the astonishing price paid two years ago has had a huge impact on the art market, both at auctions and in private sales. "Would the buyer of the Picasso self-portrait have paid \$48 million if there hadn't been a \$54 million precedent?" asks dealer Richard L. Feigen. "Would the Museum of Mod-

ern Art have paid what they did for their van Gogh?" And while Sotheby's has ended one questionable policy, the auction house is still taking heat for such practices as "chandelier bids"—fictitious bidding to drive up the price. Not until that too has been banned, adds Feigen, will "sanity have been imposed on this market."