

# Stormy weather

## 'Soak' stirs tempests of the mind



BY KEVIN NANCE

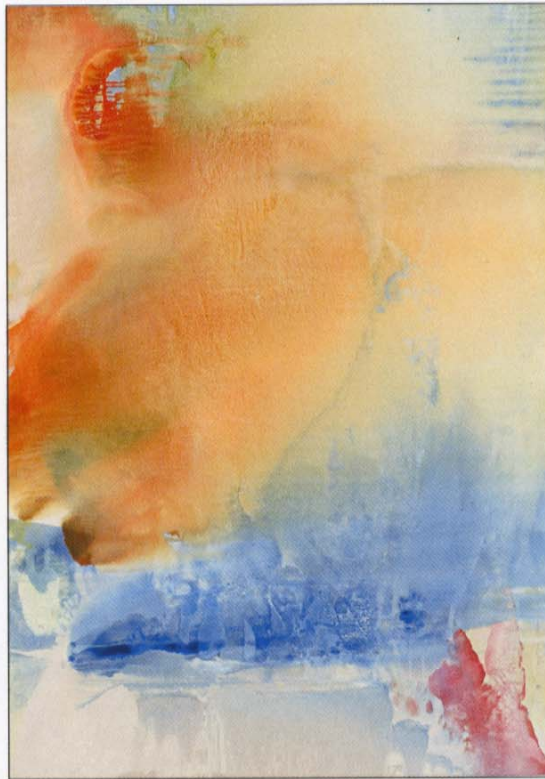
Critic-at-Large

It's human nature to see imagery in even the most abstract art. Hermann Rorschach knew this; so does the critic Alain de Botton, who has pointed out our tendency to recognize (if only subliminally) figures and family relationships in abstract sculpture by, say, Henry Moore or Alberto Giacometti. Jackson Pollock doesn't depict a whirl of fall foliage in his famous drip painting "Autumn Rhythm," but he conjures the essence of it, or so we feel.

Which brings us to "Soak," the mysterious yet powerfully evocative new show by the Chicago-based abstract painter Judith Geichman at the Alfedena Gallery. In this group of mostly large-scale, highly atmospheric acrylic paintings on canvas and paper, Geichman uses pouring, soaking, staining and part-random, part-controlled drip techniques to create swirling, diaphanous veils of color that bleed onto (and into) one another.

With a few exceptions — such as "Floating World" (2004), a vision of a mythic city suspended in a cosmic miasma, and "Romance With Reference to Fragonard" (2007), in which, disconcertingly, a human face seems to press toward us from behind a scrim — the paintings aren't remotely literal.

They don't have to be. Somehow — all right, occasionally the titles help — the paintings are unmistakable as references to nature at its most romantically majestic: vast roiling skies, turbulent seas, exotic vistas of the sort that awed the Hudson River School. "Billow," "Scene With Pink and Gray" and "Unti-



"Untitled/Atmospheric" (2007), one of Judith Geichman's abstract paintings in "Soak" at the Alfedena Gallery, suggests a body of water beneath threatening clouds.



"Icelandic Rush" (2006) by Geichman, a Chicago artist who spent five weeks in Iceland in 2005.

led/Atmospheric" (all 2007) strongly suggest bodies of water (perhaps Lake Michigan) beneath windswept, threatening clouds. "White and Blue" and "Icelandic Rush" (both 2006) evoke the

Arctic terrain around Akureyri, Iceland, where the artist spent a five-week residency in 2005. And "For M.L./Curtain" (2007) calls to mind the roughly textured walls and cascading rock for-

### ART REVIEW

#### 'JUDITH GEICHMAN: SOAK'

##### RECOMMENDED

- ◆ Through Nov. 10
- ◆ Alfedena Gallery, 434 W. Ontario
- ◆ Free
- ◆ (312) 944-4340

mations of giant caverns, which the artist has been known to explore.

As Rorschach also knew, however, where I see nature in Geichman's work, you might simply see paint expertly sloshed around on some very big canvases. This is perfectly fine, especially since the works, evaluated strictly for their formal properties, retain every ounce of their drama and grandeur.

Their primary appeal is, after all, color; alternately bold (as in the startling masses of orange, blue, yellow and red in "Untitled/Atmospheric" and "For M.L./Curtain") and subtle (as in the soft rose and pale green tones in "Scene With Pink and Gray" and "Morph").

There's neither much sense of pattern here, as in Pollock, nor of stillness, as in Rothko, and yet Geichman often comes close to matching them in intensity. If these paintings are not about actual storms, as I think they sometimes are, they clearly reflect some stormy interior weather: tempests, if you will, of the mind.

In the end, many viewers may feel that both ways of looking at this work — as pure abstraction or as a semi-transparent set of references to the material world — are far from mutually exclusive. "Soak" can be both a gorgeous exercise in the handling of paint and, if you're so inclined, a stirring signifier of a delicate, brooding, magnificent planet, dangerous and endangered.

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