ARTS MAGAZINE

POWER BOOTHE'S GAIT

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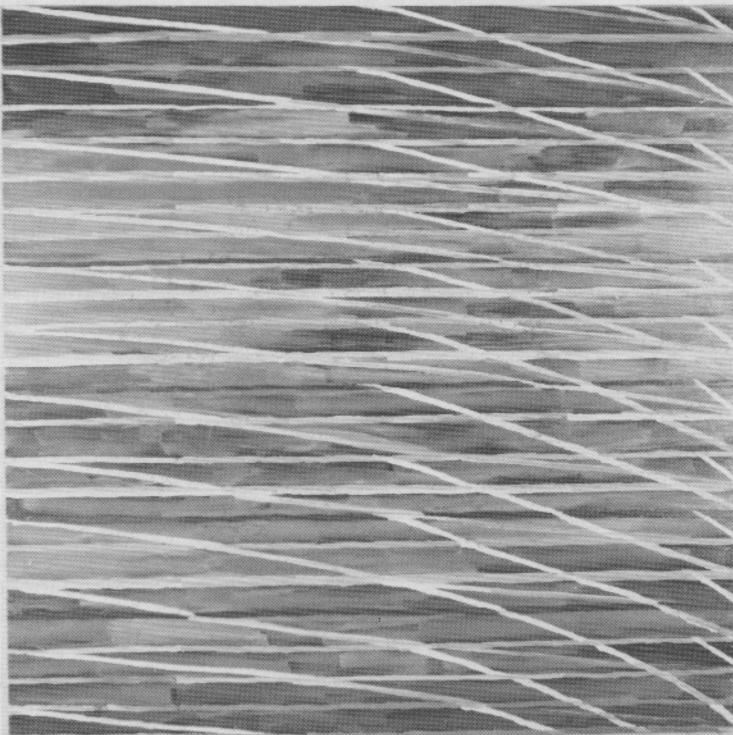


Power Boothe, Anutherium, 1979. *Oil on canvas, 72 x 72". Courtesy A.M. Sachs Gallery.*

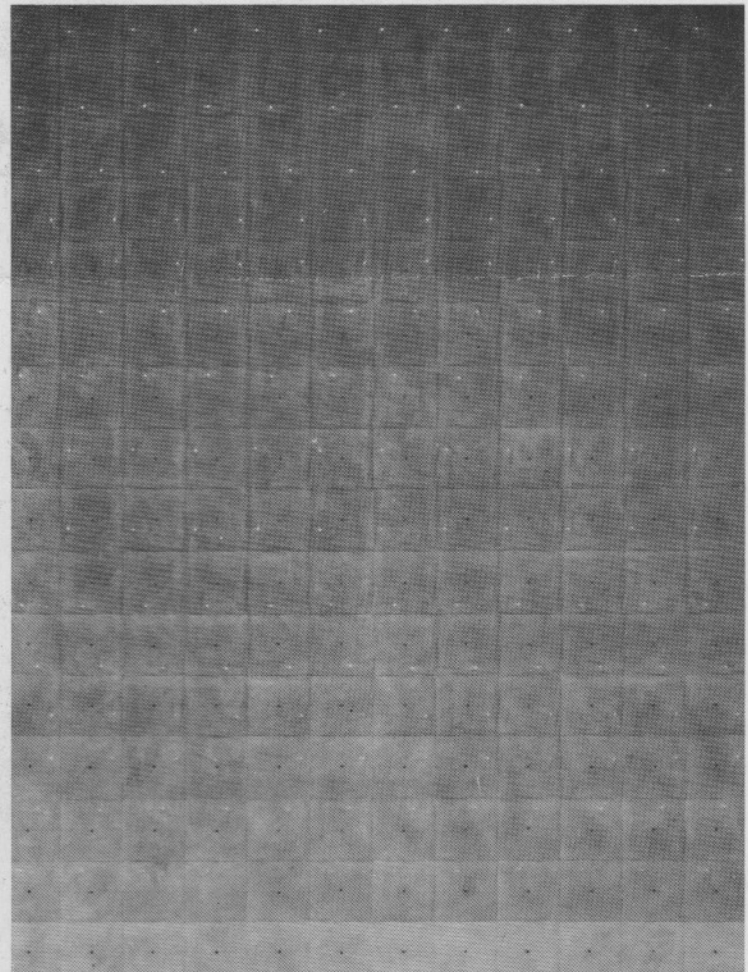
Measured, dreamlike, solemn, or quick and animated, there is always something insistently personal in the way Power Boothe treads. He is a painter for whom rhythm is the essential organizing force. Just as the symmetry of the human gait can be altered by countless fortuitous events (the most determined walker is distracted by sounds, movements, encounters), so the basic rhythmic structure of Boothe's paintings is modified by countless emotional intonations. But essentially, these paintings are intimations of basic movements in the universe to which the artist is intuitively attuned.

Boothe is among the artists who see the romance of science and sense the philosophical overtones in certain kinds of scientific inquiry. A decade ago he was painting delicate evocations of phases of the moon on canvas, and making wonderful chapbooks concerned with movements of the sun and the concept of time. These were poetic essays into the romantic domain of science. They represented Boothe's way of understanding the universe. They were far removed from the cold calculations of certain other artists who saw in the grid an organizing principle for the design of a two-dimensional surface. Boothe's works, even when they were figured with an even patterning of squares, were filled with ambiguous shadows, asymmetrical details, luminous independent passages, and the promise of depth.

For Boothe, the composition of similar units was not a way to generate pattern but a way to explore his own experience of the world. His expression of the structure of the world was, and is, always lyrical. He is drawn to the clearest and yet most mysterious works of the human hand. Shortly before his exhibition, I visited his studio and found him poring over a reproduction of Piero della Francesca's magisterial *Resurrection.* With great excitement he discussed the possible interpretations of this transfixing drama. He noted the hidden symmetries in Piero's composition and pondered the symbolic values they generated. Nothing in the painting—not the iconographical subtleties, not the alignment of perspectives, not the juxtaposition of a barren hill with a flowering hill—escaped his curiosity. Later, after an elaborate speculation concerning the iconography, he came to realize that "what interests me in Piero della Francesca is not the story (which I feel I have uniquely interpreted in his painting) but the painting as a whole—which is the only thing that really matters." He noted that:

> working through the iconography has been, in some sense, an excuse for me to spend a lot of time with the painting. I know why Piero is so important to me. He has achieved an amazing resolution (and tension) between the movement in the painting and the structure of the painting . Piero's structure is the image, and the image breathes. If the structure wasn't working it would oppress the image .

Power Boothe, The Gift, 1980. *Oil on canvas, 72 x 72". Courtesy A.M. Sachs Gallery.* ►



Power Boothe, Moon, 1973. *Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 72". Courtesy A.M. Sachs Gallery.*

This is a clear statement of the impulse that guides Boothe as a painter. Like Piero, he submits himself to a rigorous scheme which he then disrupts in the interest of painting itself. Piero

Forelock." This phrase captures the defiant spirit of "291"—personified by Stieglitz—better than mathematics ever could have. In "Mental Reactions"—also a portrait—the verbal element has the same role. While it is greatly expanded, its function is still to express Meyer's spirit. This is the meaning of the poem's title. De Zayas also seems to depict Meyer's "initial force." Thus we can trace an S-shaped curve running from the lower left of her portrait to the top of her head, to the word **FLIRT**, and ending at "He is alone." This rising curve signifies prosperity and success. Belonging to the fourth category, it indicates the acquisition of knowledge and a contribution to progress in general. The fact that Meyer's trajectory stops before reaching the top means that her life is still fruitful, that she still has much to give.

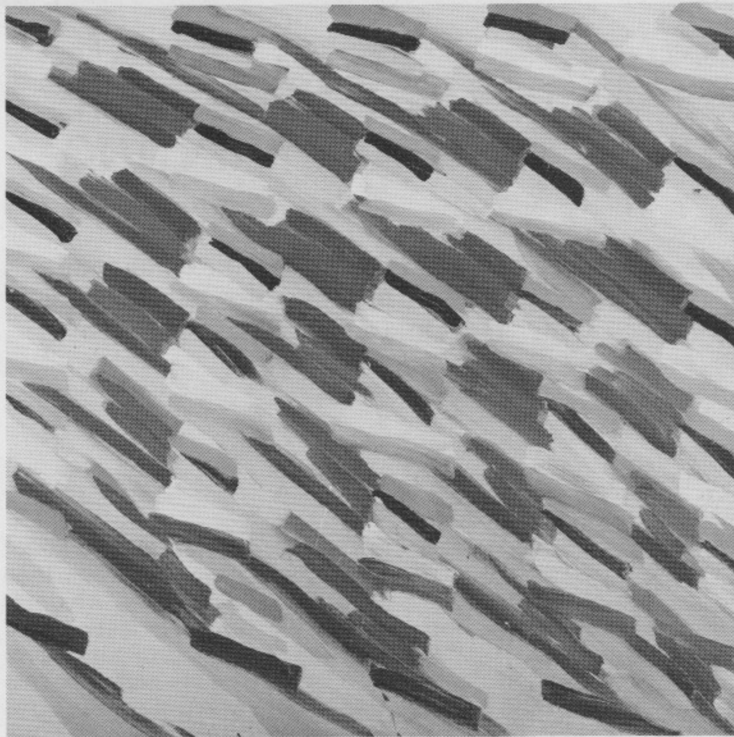
The importance of the second principle, that of geometric equivalents, has already been demonstrated. If anything, "Mental Reactions" is more geometric than the abstract caricatures. We have only to contrast it with, say, the biomorphic style of Jean Arp to see how completely this principle governs the poem. It remains to mention the role of double abstraction in de Zayas' art. His method is twofold: first, he chooses an object to symbolize his human subject; then, he simplifies it according to Cubist principles until it is unrecognizable. For example, a close analysis of the Stieglitz portrait in *291* (Fig. 2) reveals that it depicts a camera with extended bellows. A caricature of Apollinaire (Fig. 3), published in *Les Soirées de Paris* in July 1914, portrays the poet as an airplane. As we will see, a similar process is at work in "Mental Reactions" which contains two object portraits. The key to de Zayas' visual symbolism lies in the upper configuration, the one depicting Meyer's companion. If it is difficult to interpret the solid geometric figures, the central elements provide several clues. We are looking for a tall, rectangular object with an aperture in its side which is subject to rotary motion. Judging from these criteria, the figure almost certainly represents a lighthouse. The open-ended rectangle depicts the top of the tower, while the rhomboid eye constitutes its beacon. From the two parallel rings encircling it we know that the beacon rotates a full 360 degrees, warning ships in every direction. Given this information, the dark triangular forms at the top and bottom can be interpreted in one of two ways. Either they represent cliffs or large rocks, or they constitute the base of the tower. Bearing in mind that the caricatures depend on fragmentation and displacement, the viewer is free to combine the forms in any way that he pleases. The simplest combination is suggested by their orientation. If we close the gap between them, aligning their diagonal edges, we obtain an elongated pyramid. To create a recognizable lighthouse we need merely place the beacon on top. The isolated phrase "He is alone" indicates that the lighthouse is situated on a deserted coast or remote island.

On the basis of the foregoing analysis we can proceed to decipher the portrait of Agnes Ernst Meyer. One suspects that it uses fragmentation and displacement and that it is somehow connected with a lighthouse. An inventory reveals the following forms: two large right triangles, two small triangles, a straight line, a circle, a curved line, five tapered lines, and a zigzag. The large triangles are virtually identical, but the small ones differ in size and shape. One of them is an isosceles triangle. In addition, the portrait is surrounded by other forms which may or may not have a bearing on it. According to Cubist doctrine, de Zayas is free to include elements which have nothing to do with the original object. The purpose of these is aesthetic rather than functional. Similarly, he may choose to duplicate certain elements, a phenomenon corresponding to planar refraction. It is possible, for instance, that the missing object consists of one large triangle instead of two. Given the proximity of the lighthouse, one immediately thinks of a sailboat. Certainly its shape and marine associations are promising. Nevertheless, there are several objections to this interpretation. For one thing, it does not account for any of the auxiliary elements. How are we to explain the two small triangles, for example, or the circle? For another, the fact that the beacon is operating means it must be night. It is extremely unlikely that a sailboat would be out on the ocean after dark. These problems force us to reject this explanation and to return to the notion of a double triangle.

At this point two observations are in order: (1) It is surely significant that the portrait contains two pairs of triangles, and (2) the right triangles are also equilateral triangles. Proceeding on the assumption that the pairing can be traced back to the original object, we juxtapose the equilateral triangles in various symmetrical combinations. The solution to the problem requires us to rotate them 45 degrees to the left and to join them at the apex in such a way that each is a mirror image of the other. Once this has been accomplished, one perceives that the object is a butterfly. The large triangles are its wings, the circle its head, and the horizontal bar at the lower right (above the title) its body. This means that the smaller triangles are antennae. In reality they are identical—the left is distorted by perspective, indicating that the insect's head is turned. Moreover, the thickness of the antennae indicates that the creature is actually a moth. All of a sudden everything falls into place. The marine associations of the lighthouse are irrelevant: all that matters is that it is a source of light. What we have in the last analysis is a picture of a moth fluttering about a lantern—a traditional metaphor for fascination. While this symbolizes the general situation, i.e., Meyer's attraction to her partner, it refers to one line in particular. "Those eyes of his," she exclaims at one point, "I cannot get away from them . . ." The artist has (1) taken this remark, (2) translated it into metaphorical terms, (3) raised these to the visual plane, and (4) expressed them according to the rules of Cubism. The original subject has been subjected to a threefold transformation. Paradoxically, the initial metaphor is finally expressed in metonymic (synecdochic) terms. The lighthouse and moth are reduced to their basic components.

Although *291* went on to publish other visual poems, "Mental Reactions" remains the best example of this genre. Not only is it a remarkable accomplishment in itself, it represents one of the high points of the entire review. For that matter, it is unique in the history of visual poetry. Writing in *Camera Work* in 1916, de Zayas stated, with characteristic modesty, that the visual poems in *291* were based on experiments by Apollinaire and the Futurists.[7] If, as we have seen, the French poet played a crucial role in their elaboration, the Italian contribution was minimal. In the case of "Mental Reactions" it is totally lacking. Meyer herself chose to follow Apollinaire fairly closely. Stylistically her text is indistinguishable from, say, "Lundi rue Christine" (*Po*, 180-82). De Zayas, however, sought to reinterpret Apollinaire's experience and to develop his own personal style. A number of factors distinguish the poem from its predecessors. For one thing, it is the result of a collaboration—a situation virtually unheard of in visual poetry. This in itself merits close study. For another, with few exceptions the visual elements are distinct from the verbal elements. De Zayas draws objects and lines in order to illustrate the text. Apollinaire compresses and reshapes his text in such a way that it illustrates itself. In the calligrams the drawing *is* the text (and vice versa). Finally, unlike Apollinaire, de Zayas draws shapes that are virtually impossible to recognize. Rejecting the representational principles of the *calligramme*, he relies on objectification, fragmentation, and dislocation. Without a doubt, the application of abstract caricature was his most original contribution to visual poetry. Through the process of double abstraction, de Zayas was able to create a work of rare complexity and visual appeal. In this respect "Mental Reactions" constitutes a real *tour de force*.

1. For a study of his art and its influence on Picabia, see Willard Bohn, "The Abstract Vision of Marius de Zayas," *The Art Bulletin*, LXIII, 3 (September 1980), pp. 434-52.
2. For the history of his relations with Apollinaire, see Willard Bohn, "Guillaume Apollinaire and the New York Avant-Garde," *Comparative Literature Studies*, XIII, 1 (March 1976), pp. 40-51.
3. Apollinaire, *Oeuvres poétiques*, ed. Marcel Adéma and Michel Décaudin (Paris: Gallimard/Pléiade, 1965), pp. 183-85. Hereafter cited in the text as *Po*.
4. Craig R. Bailey, "The Art of Marius de Zayas," *Arts Magazine*, LIII, 1 (September 1978), p. 141.
5. Dickran Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives: Dada and the American Avant-Garde 1910-1925* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), p. 34.
6. These quotations and the following summary are taken from the preface to his 1913 exhibition at "291." The latter was reprinted in *Camera Work* on two different occasions: first as "Exhibition Marius de Zayas" (April-July 1913), then as "Caricature: Absolute and Relative" (April 1914).
7. "*291*—A New Publication," *Camera Work*, XLVIII (October 1916), p. 62. De Zayas states that they are experiments in "psychotype," which he defines as follows: "Psychotype, an art which consists in making the typographical characters participate in the expression of the thoughts and in the painting of the states of soul, no more as conventional symbols but as signs having a significance in themselves." De Zayas omits to add that both the definition and the term "psychotype" are taken from an article by Amédée Ozenfant ("Psychotypie & typométrique," *L'Elan*, IX, February 1916, inside front cover).



Power Boothe, As Far as You Can See, 1981. *Oil on canvas, 72 x 72". Courtesy A.M. Sachs Gallery.* ►

wrote a treatise on the five regular, perfect solids underying the forms of nature, but he did not hesitate to paint irregularities when they suited his radiant vision. And the results—the frescoes and altarpieces so eagerly studied in the twentieth century—are still infinitely mysterious.

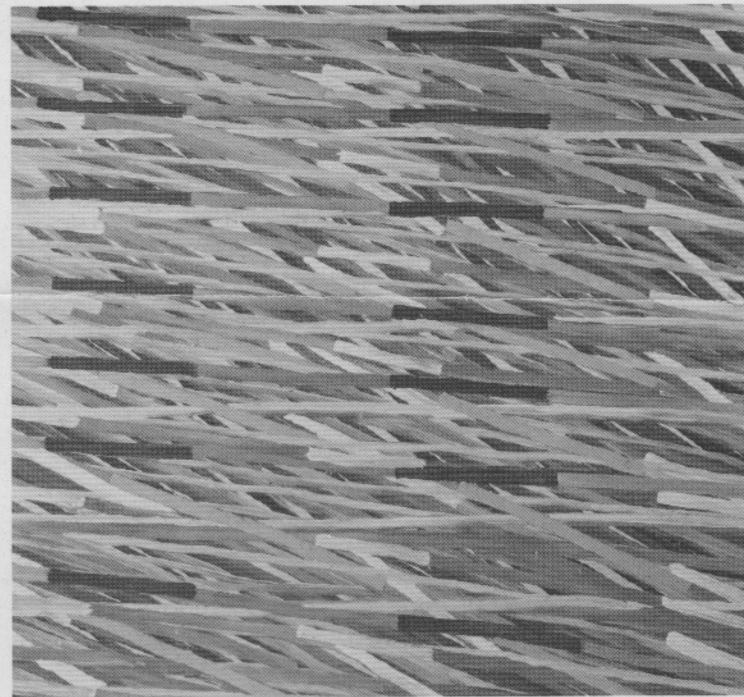
Piero is not the only artist Boothe has contemplated. He has spoken of Tintoretto with equal enthusiasm, and he has always studied Manet. No doubt it is the legible body of each luminous stroke in Manet's work that excites Boothe. The precision of light effects in a Manet is something clearly desired by Boothe as he moves from phase to phase in his painting, particularly in his most recent works. Joyce said he used Homer's Ulysses as a trellis. Boothe uses his rhythmic system of strokes in the same way. The visual patterns are there to propose experiences far more complex than mere surface designs. Boothe knows that a painting is both itself and something other.

Nothing is quite as abstract or as hard to talk about as space, or spaces. Yet, it is evident in the history of painting that individuals experience spaces in individual ways. Piero's spaces and Tintoretto's are distinct. Matisse and Picasso had very different intuitive responses to their lived spaces. So did Rothko and Pollock. Pollock's way of expressing his intuition of space was to move line like a shuttle, entrapping light at various levels and speaking of time throughout. Boothe's way (not so different from Pollock's) is to mark his canvas with well defined strokes at different levels, allowing the interstices to suggest depth. His space is always flowing in and behind the picture plane, sometimes in a steady uninflected way, sometimes in an almost imperceptible drift. Events occur and occupy space but, essentially, the space flows.

Boothe's flow, however, is abstract. It is not the steady streaming of a river or the pattern of the winds. It is a current that eddies in and around his forms; that is interrupted and resumed at differing intervals; that is guided by a series of complex pictorial axes. These axes are not concealed. In one painting Boothe can propose a set of verticals and one of near-horizontals animated by a set of diagonals or near-diagonals. These in turn are given different weights by his choice of chroma and material density. In certain paintings, there is a lattice-like consistency in which lines contain the flow beneath. In others, there is simply a procession of emphatically colored forms that, in the final gestalt, work both as visible structure and as movement. These are the elements of Boothe's idiosyncratic rhythms. Sometimes they pulse and pound with the intensity of Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*; sometimes they are as subtle as Debussy.

Certainly delectation is the principal end here. Boothe is a sensuous painter whose love of color with all its potential to describe space and form is preeminent. He does not avoid illusion. On the contrary, in recent paintings Boothe has introduced echoes that could almost be called shadows, and that bring certain of his forms into three-dimensional relief. Or at least into an ambiguous relationship with the base plane. In *The Gift,* for instance, Boothe sets strong red and green clusters ringing by a staggered set of black marks and white crests that sometimes makes the clusters read in terms of chiaroscuro. In *Displacement,* broad red and black strokes are massed so that they can be read on several different levels in space and as forms picked out and modeled by light. As in earlier more tonal works, Boothe has retained his interest in what happens when a line is interrupted or when it intersects with another. At the point of intersection, or near-intersection, there is a crucial event both in terms of vibration and in terms of organizing the whole. This consciousness of the "point," which has preoccupied artists from Piero to Klee, satisfies the deep need to invent a center from which order is articulated.

Kandinsky talked of the inner ring, the inner sound of a painting. Sometimes in Boothe's new works this synesthetic effect is arresting. In *Two Cues,* for instance, the syncopation of orange and blue is pronounced. The dominant forms, composed of three clustered strokes, are slightly divided, like a percussive instrument. Their clapper-like appearance creates an ex-



pectation of sound at any moment. Boothe's bold use of a black ground emphasizes the two different modes of presenting space (or "perspective orientations" as he calls them), and at the same time, offers clear parallels with the musical interpretation of interval, rhythm, and harmony available here.

What is most significant about Boothe's new paintings is not so much the resolution of certain implicit compositional problems posed almost ten years ago, but rather the resounding decision to allow his inner pulse, his personal gait, to determine his imagery. There is an opening to an immense variety of sensations, many based on the direct experience of the elements in nature. Through robust color and charging line, Boothe manages to reintegrate the elements of the great western tradition in painting that during his formative years in the late 1960s were so adamantly refused. In this he extends the ambitions of the Abstract Expressionists who prolonged the life of the figurative tradition (not figurative in the banal sense, but figurative nonetheless). He takes back all the means available in the history of painting—line, color, perspective, rhythm, light and shadow, aerial perspective, shape—and joyously embraces illusion.