

## Sean Scherer Stux Gallery

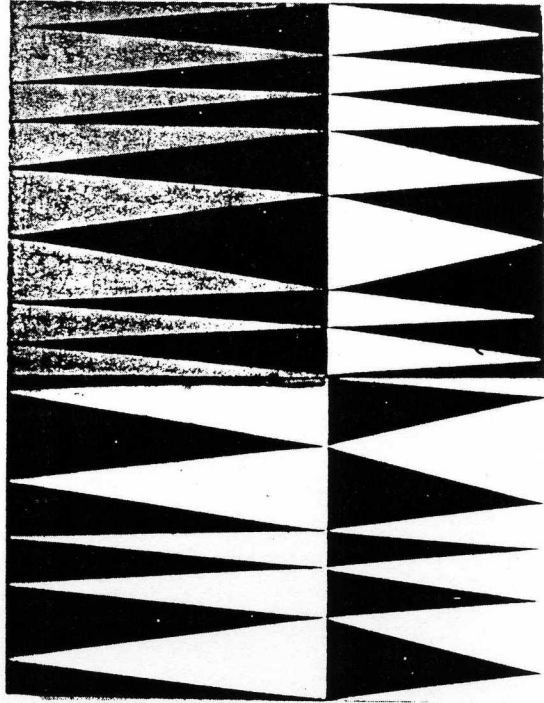
Although installed in a neat and orderly fashion in a single room undauntedly hung at a continuous, eye-level line, Sean Scherer's latest exhibition is like a large quasi-constructivist war machine teetering on the edge of control. Scherer adopts the look of Russian high modernism, particularly Malevich's *Suprematist* compositions, as his own. And he subjects his paintings to a process of artificial aging—their uppermost layers suspended over a tarry ground—in which patterns of cracks dissolve the familiar floating rectangles into so many powerless bits. If this is intended as a reference to Malevich's so-called failed utopian vision, then it obscures the context of suprematism altogether. When first developing his theories, Malevich, in fact, was directly inspired by urban industrial decay. As Eisenstein said of his work, "Like many towns on the west side. Sooty and dismal. All the main streets are covered with white paint splashed over the red brick walls, and against this white background are green circles, reddish-orange squares, blue rectangles. This is Vitebsk 1920. Kazimir Malevich's brush has passed over its walls." Decay already is implicit, so what is Scherer doing, besides promoting a view that actually glosses over history?

Looking at *Abrogation*, a square painting stretched over the face of a triangular box fitted snugly into a corner, Scherer's elementary binary scheme becomes

clear. On the one hand, this is a naturally and immediately evocative work, skillfully painted; its entire surface is covered by a tortured wall of off-white, which looks like a layer of rare cream dried in the desert sun. On the other hand, what lies below, so to speak, within the vague space of the box, has been contrived to draw meaning from, and at the same time impose it upon, the surface. The switch

of the machine has been thrown, and its out-of-balance critique of constructivism proceeds. Tatlin's 1915 *Corner Relief* comes to mind, and are we now supposed to think that his beliefs are no longer relevant to our own? Tatlin was no utopian, nor was he really a constructivist in the way that Naum Gabo and El Lissitzky were, yet Scherer's paintings refer equally well to all three, as they do also to Paul Klee and the Bauhaus. Scherer's critique, more a generalizing look than a specific attack, has been designed to make his work seem, by contrast, ultracontemporary—i.e., revisionist and self-reflective. Yet, instead, it is only nostalgic in this regard.

Nevertheless, there remains much to recommend here. Scherer has a precocious mastery at his materials and technique, and occasionally he strikes a composition of great force entire-



Sean Scherer, *Shard*, 1990. Oil and wax on canvas, 30 x 23 inches. Courtesy Stux Gallery, New York.

ly on its own terms. *Grace* is such a painting. A large white "Z" shape, generalizing enough so as not to be historically referential, moves like a ladder from the top to the bottom of the canvas. This almost demure movement brings the work into our contemporary view, carrying an irony that cuts both ways. The canvas, divided in half horizontally, is dark on top and lighter underneath—a state of grace above and another below. Patches of cracking well up like sores on the upper half of the "Z," creeping their way downward. If this is a successful, albeit derivative condemnation of utopian thought, then it shows that Scherer can make decisively resonant paintings without imposing a false order on them.

—ALAN HANSON