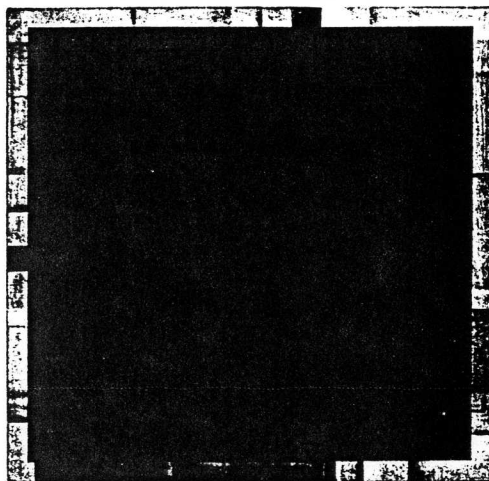


# Beyond Decorative

## Sean Scherer at Anna Kustera

by Carl Skelton

Sean Scherer, *Reitz*, 1999, oil and wax on canvas, 24 x 24".



There was a time, in France, when you could say a painting was decorative without insulting the artist. What it meant, more or less, was that the formal aspects were an important part of the picture. Hopefully, Sean Scherer won't be offended by the suggestion that his new paintings at Anna Kustera are, well, decorative, meta-decorative, and trans-decorative.

*Decorative.* Scherer has started from a pretty easy premise—the image sources for this show are fashionable, readily available, straightforward in their manufacture and formal logic. The appropriation is impure, though. Every placement, every juxtaposition, seems to have been considered, optimized, made a little closer to just right than the paintings' mass-produced ancestors. These enhancements suggest an easy acceptance of the ethical ambiguities of Modernism in general. The singular fetish object: why not? As long as you're prepared to do a great

job of it, which he is.

*Meta-Decorative.* There are two groups of work in the show: the ones with French names, and the ones with Arab names. The French paintings are indeed a pastiche of the palette and formal devices of a school of '50s decoration—earth tones, hard edges, rounded-off corners, overlapping geometric shapes. Of course, those references themselves derive from antecedents in painting. The Arab pictures, on the other hand, seem to riff on details of Islamic tile patterns, sublimated through formal variation procedures pioneered at the Bauhaus, and further reduced to the super-graphic wall treatments that have only recently been painted over in shopping malls and airports. Whether French or Arab, the paintings consistently work to keep their whole genealogy in play: they attempt a synthesis of entire histories of formal and ideo-logical evolution, or sublimation.

*Trans-Decorative.* The paint-

ings are artifacts of the acting out of an idea of the difference between then and now. Ten years ago, Scherer was working more directly from Constructivist and Suprematist sources, the radical ideological aesthetic movements that developed around the time of the Russian Revolution. Now, he is dealing with formal derivatives of those vocabularies. Sometimes a red square is just a red square, especially if it's a neutral gray. The image reproduced here, *Reitz*, is two feet square. It's also the most straightforwardly allegorical piece in the show. Malevich's *Red Square* has been drained of its redness altogether, and is now almost the same gray as those cards photographers use to check for correct exposure. It's nearly that flat, nearly that empty. At the same time, it has expanded to almost fill the frame, squeezing all the other elements back to the status of border bit. Those bits, a little more painterly, a little more varied as warm or cool tones, are shrinking, fading, disappearing. The big square is radically blank in this last moment before it obliterates everything, becomes everything. But then, this is a still picture.

These paintings, like all paintings, have an ethical logic; they take a position. They articulate a set of values, by demonstration. Scherer's posture here is good-looking, smart, distant. At the same time, I notice a nuance in this work that's not purely formal—its conceptual ambivalence seems to be an informed choice rather than a passive acceptance of poststructural circularity. If that's right, then these paintings are more modern than they look.