

A R T N O W

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'REUNION' (1989): Acrylic on canvas, 9 by 12 in., by Charles Seliger.

A Small But Brilliant Sea of Color

CHARLES SELIGER lives a private life, works to make a living, has a family, and, in the quiet time he has to himself, paints. It is better that way. Most of the people he deals with in business or in everyday life have no idea that he is a painter, much less collected and respected here and abroad.

Seliger makes small paintings; they could fit in a book. He likes the solitude of obscurity, and he likes the modest dimensions of his work.

They both permit him to fully touch what he is doing. They also give him the time and space to do just what he wants, allowing him to fall through the cracks. That's where the creative process begins.

Seliger started showing his abstract paintings as a teenager at Howard Putzel's 67 Gallery and Peggy Guggenheim's Art Of This Century Gallery in New York City in the early 1940s. He showed with the giants of Abstract Expressionism like Jackson Pollock, David Smith, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Tobey. His work grew out of a kind of biomorphism and automatic, stream-of-consciousness process that was essentially surrealist.

The work he is doing today comes from the same place. In 50 years, he has merely sharpened the focus and refined the process. Any changes are more the result of how life changes. The vision has remained the same. Why?

Why, when the giants like Pollock despaired with where their existential vision of a meaningless universe had taken them, was Seliger able to go on?

It is evident from looking at Seliger's work as a teenager that he was wise beyond his years. It was as though he was born with a highly evolved personal vision already intact, a boy among men.

He didn't get caught up or consumed by ambition. He was after something else. Maybe he embraced the place modern rationalism had brought us intuitively, without conflict, seeing it as a beginning, an eternally unfolding cosmic reality.

It is clear from his paintings that it is in that place, that void, that Seliger discovered some

kind of peace and perspective, a view of life as vast as the universe, from inside the atom to beyond the Milky Way. His paintings positively celebrate that.

Seliger took Abstract Expression beyond its large physical gestures to a fine inner experience. It is private, contemplative, which explains why the paintings are small. They need to be held. They also affirm the individuality of the aesthetic encounter. We look at art alone. Seliger's paintings are so small they can only properly be seen one person at a time.

What is different about the new work is that Seliger wanted a more physical quality of paint to go along with his sense of detail. The paintings often start out the same way, as large gestures that dissolve into smaller and smaller parts as the painting evolves. The difference is that he has started using glazes to build up the surface. Pigment and light become trapped in a thick glass-like crust. From a distance the paintings look the same, but up close we can see that the action comes forward, and the marks swim in a brilliant sea of color.

WHAT has always been jewel-like in Seliger's work in terms of detail is only more so now because of the new transparent surface. The richness and depth of his vision is now matched by a physicality that completes the abstract naturalism of his images.

We experience them the way we might look into a tidal pool or peer down at the earth from a plane. In his 60s, he has had what amounts to nothing less than a breakthrough.

Ironically, Seliger achieved success as the very youngest of painters, way ahead of his time. But now that he's got a full life of experience behind him, and presumably so much more to offer, our youth-oriented culture has put him on the shelf. Still, I can't help but think that these new paintings are his most precious treasures of all. Charles Seliger is just getting better.

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