

The Sun

Matter-of-Fact Still Lives & the Last Man Standing

By MAUREEN MULLARKEY

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Charles Seliger was the youngest of the Abstract Expressionist circle that gathered around Peggy Guggenheim in the 1940s. He is now the sole survivor of the group. His creative initiative remains fertile and undiminished, and his painting is more jubilant than ever - as if the lightness of being becomes more bearable with age.

Rarely does any exhibition fulfill the claims made for it in a catalog essay. But Mr. Seliger's current work earns every word of praise that accompanies it. James Siena's reaction to seeing Mr. Seliger's painting for the first time echoes my own: "My first encounter with Charles' work ... left me dumbstruck. Here was art so personal, yet so clearly a part of Abstract Expressionism, I was embarrassed not to have seen it sooner."

Over 60 years, Mr. Seliger has used Abstract Expressionist impulses as points of departure for an individual language that has never hardened into a mannerism. Unlike the New York School painters who sought a signature style, Mr. Seliger established his signature with size. He has kept his work to an unassuming scale, gradually reducing dimensions to the point where he can be called a miniaturist.

Immensity resides in these miniatures, as intricate as 15th-century illuminated Persian manuscripts. Not much more than 12 inches square, each panel is a Lilliputian universe of radiant, floating particles of color held in colloidal suspension. Delicate tonal gradations, created by transparent washes on gessoed panel and overlaid with fluid tracery, recall the coloristic subtleties of Klee's "polyphonic" Bauhaus watercolors. They yield spatial depth and movement in poetic compositions that suggest but do not depict images viewed through an electron microscope - or an infrared telescope, as in the haloed color-specks of "Infinite Boundaries" (2006). The quasi-scientific tendencies of the Bauhaus echo, too, in Mr. Seliger's nonliteral but clear references to the world of microscopic science.

Mark Rothko insisted that the only valuable subject matter is that "which is tragic and timeless." But it is easier to inflate one's own morbidities into the spirit of tragedy than to maintain vitality against the swell. Rothko committed suicide 36 years ago, his despair reinforced by a cultural climate seeking verities where they do not exist - on canvas and in the artist's preoccupations. Mr. Seliger is still creating, still celebrating worlds within a grain of sand. The last man standing, in the exultant beauty and modesty of his work, confounds the thunderous illusions that fed the Abstract Expressionist mystique.

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