

## David Reed

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, SAN DIEGO,  
20 September–3 January

Titled "Motion Pictures," David Reed's twenty-four-year survey exploits abstract painting's capacity to create its own context. Teasing out the buried history and original architecture of the museum (née Irving Gill's Scripps House, 1916), Reed's smart selection of forty paintings and four video-installations transforms the white cube of the modern art gallery into a haunted house whose ghostly reflections and spine-tingling evocations are at once amusing and thought-provoking.

In the westernmost gallery, *Sunset Room for Vampires* (1998) plays on a monitor by a large window that overlooks the ocean. The video does not depict a room, but instead two moving surfaces: the view out the window at sunset, with clouds roiling over the ocean in fast motion, and a



David Reed  
#323, 1990-93  
Oil and alkyd on linen  
112" x 46"

fade-in of four paintings over the sun going down. In the fade-in, the most distinct image of a painting (itself a roiling mass of sunset-colored swirls over black) looks familiar. Piquing the viewer's memory, it is a reversed, mirror image of #337 (1994), which hangs on the opposite wall. In effect, Reed has made the video monitor into a looking glass that reflects the real painting across the room and turns the viewer into a vampire whose reflection does not appear in the video-mirror.

On another wall, #350 (*Vampire Painting for Graz*) (1996) is a monolithic mass of transparent blue-violet, laid out in larger-than-lifesize strokes that twist and pull away from one another as if they were the snaky strands of Medusa's writhing hair. The contours of Reed's frozen, Baroque billows and surrounding dark droplets are outlined in bands of sherbet colors, which make the painting appear to be a video color-test cartoon. Incident and accident are not relevant here. While each mark seems fetishized, the image is not precious. Everything across its surface seems to be off-kilter, as if the appendage of some monstrous painting-machine has broken off—and taken on an undead life of its own. Motion and its trace are slowed to a pause pregnant with ominous overtones.

As a whole, Reed's paintings evolve from the articulation of single, gestural incidents to the grand orchestration of suspended split-seconds that seem to inhabit a netherworld detached from time's everyday passage and organic life's warm-blooded comfort. In #73 (1975), a series of similar marks—thirteen strokes of one brush and color across five abutted, body-size canvases—track the differences in making marks that extend to the full length of the painter's reach. In more recent paintings, Reed's Technicolor brushstrokes are removed from such direct (if mechanized) gesturalism. In #339 (1994), for example, a hot-pink mass of curls is excerpted and embalmed on an opaque white ground. The scratches left from the repeated sanding of the painting's smooth surface do not unify its elements, link figure to ground, or elucidate the process of its making. Instead, they give Reed's partially silkscreened oil-and-alkyd-on-linen the contradictory presence of an appliqué and an excavation. The image's mysteriousness cannot be unraveled visually or conceptually, but is as firmly planted

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in the labor of its making as are the specks of dust and minuscule bubbles disrupting its surface.

Conjuring the family name of the gallery in which it's installed, *Sun Parlor for Ellen Browning Scripps* (1998) is a live video projection that transforms viewers into screened ghosts—history being a second (or a century) away. The painting #212 (*Vice*) (1984-85) faces a long window in what was once the family's sun parlor, which was built to give a magnificent view of the water, cliffs, and road below. Mounted above the painting is a surveillance camera that feeds a live image of viewers to another darkened gallery, where it is projected onto a similarly scaled painting, #429 (1998). The image of people looking at the world outside the gallery and at the paintings inside it (in conjunction with the technological transfer of scale and temporality) becomes a big tangle of looking, thinking, and reflecting upon how the two activities intersect yet never completely dissolve into one another. Moving past the camera's lens, we become painterly incidents, appearing for a fleeting moment inside art's frame.

Reed uses the stillness of abstract painting as an object and an image, to reach, simultaneously, into the past and the future. He carefully builds tangible contexts around his works not as explanations of their meanings, but as literal tools of association that pick up threads of place and time to create meandering mazes of multilevel representations. Here, his paintings remain cool in their unblinking beauty, absolutely impenetrable because everything that counts takes place not behind surfaces nor shrouded by brushstrokes, but in front of these elements—right where you stand, or just over your shoulder, if you look quickly.

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