

Review: Roberta Smith, Art in Review, The New York Times, March 26, 2010

Marcia Hafif: 'From the Inventory: Black Paintings, 1979-1980'

Marcia Hafif's Black Paintings from 1979-80 may have improved with age, but I can't say for sure. I don't actually remember having seen them, although they were shown at the Sonnabend Gallery, then in SoHo, in 1981. Ms. Hafif, who is 80, is much more associated in my mind with bright colors and often smaller canvases.

So these works are a surprise and so is their effectiveness. They were not even a new idea 30 years ago. Ad Reinhardt and Frank Stella had already staked out the mostly black surface, to mention only the most obvious names. But Ms. Hafif was apparently undaunted, perhaps because she had no intention of actually using black to evoke blackness and no interest in any discernible form or division.

As usual she simply wanted to put brush to canvas, leaving a certain mark in a certain color and proceeding from one stroke to the next, beside or over its predecessor, until the entire surface was covered to her liking, in a process both devotional and workmanlike. The colors she used here include the darkest of ultramarine blues and burnt umbers applied in loose, substantial strokes that give the surfaces a feathery softness. Each of the four paintings here, all measuring 7 feet by 6 1/2 feet, has its own qualities of tone and texture, nearness and farness, like various night skies.

Their differences, while subtle, emerge without undue taxation and with a deeply characteristic Hafifian earnestness that seems to say: Just do it and mean it; it will be new enough.

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