

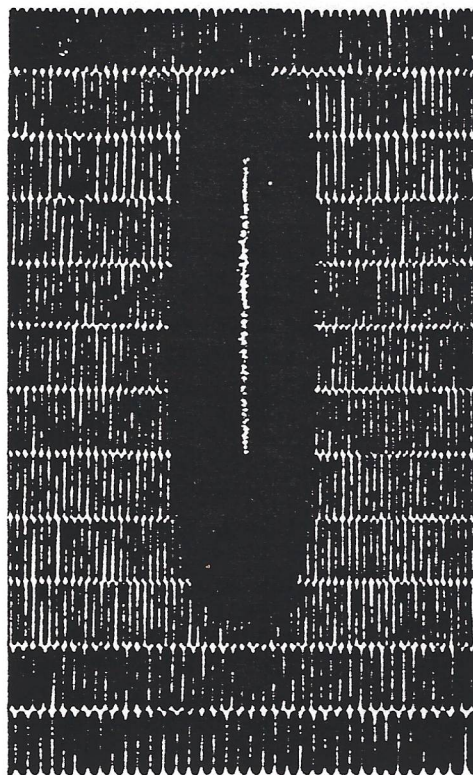
Joseph Albers wrote, in his *Interaction of Color*, "In visual perception a color is almost never seen as it really is—as it physically is. This fact makes color the most relative medium in art. In order to use color effectively it is necessary to recognize that color deceives continually [and] that one and the same color evokes innumerable readings." Joan Witek tackles these perceptual dilemmas head on in the body of work she has produced over the last ten years, recently presented in a retrospective exhibition at the Carnegie Institute's Museum of Art and in an exhibition of recent work at Rosa Esman Gallery. Witek has worked exclusively in black, eschewing all color, since about 1974. The earliest works are characterized by the use of square and cruciform shapes which may be said to have been created in the spirit of minimalist statements of the 1960s. While this work initially featured some kind of linear design, the artist was soon working with more uniformly articulated surfaces, often quadrants of black (black pigment which consists of powdered graphite and oil paint).

The subtly shimmering surfaces achieved by Witek's mix of media produced a surprisingly wide range of nuances that seem to evoke a coloristic variety not unlike that perceived in Ad Reinhardt's late "black" paintings. This is all the more interesting since Witek does not use underlay color to build the surface "up" to the level of deepest and darkest chromaticism. Hers were as alternatively translucent and opaque, accessible and impenetrable as that of a Brice Marden. Our penchant to find color perhaps suggests as much our own innate ability to compensate for the lack of color as Witek's skill in evoking moods and state of being corresponding to colors predetermined by cultural custom. In addition, we must recognize the strong underlying passion of her work, which is ironic in terms of our usual associations with this coloristic and formal vocabulary—associations which are the legacy of the "minimalist" era.

As one looks at Witek's most recent work, one realizes the sensitive and suggestive effects that the artist achieves merely through gesture and space, and through the relative proportions

JOAN WITEK

Joan Witek.
Introductory Glyph.
1982. Oil and
powdered graphite.
95 x 60".
Courtesy Rosa
Esman Gallery.



of light/white/canvas and dark/black/oil and graphite. About three years ago Witek introduced strokes into her work. This development was inspired by the preparatory drawings for painting. In these works she utilized strokes of ink to delineate the areas that would be black in the final composition. The variance in size and width of the strokes began to suggest a systematic approach with regard to scale that would be illuminated and worked out in subsequent paintings.

At first the painting strokes were four inches long, the size of one's finger, and then a larger arithmetic increase was introduced—six and eight inches—the size of the hand. In a work such as *Gardens of the Villa Medici* (1983) the resultant visual and systematic arrangement is made clear. In the third and eighth row of 6-inch strokes, and the fourth and sixth row of 8-inch strokes, what the artist has called a "geometrically common destiny" is established. Witek achieves in this composition not only an abstract geometry for landscape but also creates a language to make statements unique to herself. The different proportions of the glyphs became imbued with specific meanings that carry into other paintings.

A change in space also shifts the spatial readings of the paintings, and reaches its ultimate expression in *Introductory Glyph* (1982) in which one large stroke

becomes a negative space. This is diametrically opposite to the visual effects achieved by the placement of smaller strokes. The areas of canvas left blank in the application of the cigar-shaped visual lozenges create their own dynamic visual pattern, providing an alternative means of access to the composition. The positive/negative optical effects can be seen to shift between the strokes and the canvas, and the unpainted canvas and the strokes, but in *Introductory Glyph* the expanse of the central glyph, surrounded as it is by twelve registers of regularly placed strokes (larger ones on the bottom two rows), creates a decidedly negative space (a compositional black hole) that literally pulls the space dramatically back into the center. To counterbalance this effect, and to achieve a visual electricity that is comparable to that of the diamond-shaped interstices between the bottoms and tops of the rows of glyphs, Witek places a jagged edge down the center of the large glyph.

In other recent works the arrangement of glyphs and their variation in size seem to eloquently express the thematic content evoked by the titles. In *It's a Jungle, Out There, Not Because of the Gorillas but the Ants* (1981), Witek makes a wry commentary on her experiences in the business world, reflecting on the actual nature of the pitfalls; as she has said, the small glyphs

indicate the sinister "bites" that lay beneath a seemingly innocuous image. In *The Return* (1983), inspired by the turmoil of a personal relationship, the artist reverts to her original 4-inch strokes, utilizing a formal nostalgia to symbolize the status of the relationship. She completes the imagery with the "furry" strokes, with jagged white lines inside, reflecting visually the anxiety which accompanied this nostalgia. Perhaps the most direct expression can be seen in *Giving Way* (1982) in which the larger fatter strokes on top actually "give way" to the smaller, thinner ones on the bottom.

Although drawings originally served as an impetus for the paintings, specifically in the introduction of strokes or glyphs as compositional elements, in the most recent work the drawings are created after the painting. In these Witek also has effected a change of medium (from pen to brush and ink) which has resulted in an increased "hand" quality, in a wavy, quivering effect that not incidentally mimics the optical effects of so-called Pop Art; thus the serial occurrence of compositional elements continue to have a distinct effect in the drawings as they do in the paintings. Witek has explained this *modus operandi* by noting that the drawing affords her an opportunity to repeat a configuration established in a canvas on a different scale. In the Platonic sense the painting is the message, the drawing is the echo, the difference between what appears to be and what is. The smaller scale also predicates a different formality and emotional content; it is more contained and controlled, and so achieves an intensity that the artist herself likens to the discipline of a Samurai aesthetic.

Witek has observed that even after all this time, she finds working in black a very rich mode for her purposes. Indeed, even with this severely restricted palette, she has been able to achieve great depth and passion that are not ordinarily associated with black. One assumes that she will continue to expound its paradoxical richness of expression when combined with the glyphic "language" that she is currently exploring. (Rosa Esman, *May 22-June 23*; Carnegie Institute, *March 3-April 29*)

Lowery Stokes Sims