

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Art in America



Diehl, Carol. "Thinking, Mapping, Painting." *Art in America*, April 2005, pp. 110–15.

Thinking, Mapping, Painting

Over the last decade, Terry Winters has increasingly sought to translate systems of information—and the ways we think about them—into pictorial space.

BY CAROL DIEHL

When I first came across Terry Winters's paintings, in the early '80s at Sonnabend Gallery in New York, they were somber and dark, layered with accumulations of earth-toned gestural marks that seemed labored despite their lack of refinement. While the semi-abstract forms were derived from nature, it was nature in decay, depictions not of life but of the residue of life—dry husks, shells and bones—rendered in the melancholy hues of November, and laid out like specimens within the confines of the picture plane. These were slow paintings, especially for the fast, cocaine-driven era that also brought us graffiti, Prince, big-shouldered “power suits” and Schnabel's plate-encrusted canvases. Even now, without the contrast of glitter and bombast, Winters's work of this period comes across as sober, introspective and still.

So I was not prepared, one day in 1999, to walk into an exhibition by the same artist, this time at Matthew Marks Gallery, and be blasted by some of the most energetic paintings I'd ever seen. Titled “Graphic Primitives,” this group of nine oversize (75-by-108-inch) oil-and-alkyd paintings, with their color-filled surfaces, seemed to mark some heretofore uncharted midpoint between order and chaos—dense, convoluted layers of loosely painted webby grids and spirals that not only filled the canvas but suggested fields beyond its limits. Appearing to spring, geyserlike, from unseen depths, these networks erupted outward (or perhaps imploded; they could be seen both ways), implying worlds beneath and beyond.

Now 10 years of this work—Terry Winters's paintings, drawings and prints from 1994 to 2004—have been gathered in an exhibition that originated at the Addison Gallery in Andover, Mass., and is traveling to museums in San Diego and Houston. The overall impression is of an explosion of images by a mature artist who has overcome earlier inhibitions to the point that he can barely keep up with the ideas spewing forth, yet is eager to take on challenges that will push his work still further. Viewed with this in mind, his earlier canvases, revisited last winter in yet another exhibition at Matthew Marks (“Terry Winters 1981-1986”), reveal themselves as essential investigations by an earnest young painter—he was then in his 30s—thoroughly engaged in

Terry Winters: Computational Architecture, 1995, oil and alkyd resin on linen, 92 1/4 by 118 1/2 inches. Images this article courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

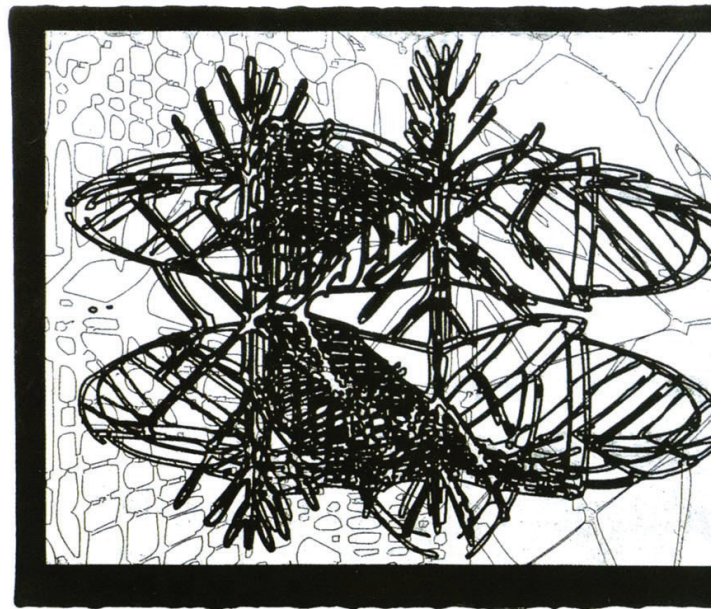




Good Government, 1984, oil on linen, 101% by 137% inches.

finding out what he could do with the physical properties of paint, and more concerned with the process of exploration than with making a definitive statement. Even now, when his statement has grown so much more powerful, it still seems as if his criterion for stopping work on any given piece is whether or not he's learned enough from it.

The works in the current exhibition are grouped according to the titles of the gallery shows in which some of them first appeared: "Foundations and Systems" (1994), "Computations and Chains" (1995-98), "Graphic Primitives" (1998), "Location Plan" (1999), "Set Diagram" (2000-02), "Meshworks" (1999-2002) and "Turbulence Skins" (2000-04). Separating them out this way, however, seems to be more a useful organizational exercise than a demarcation of specific series, since many of the same ideas spill over from one group to the next. All inhabit an uncanny territory between image and abstraction—they might be pictures or diagrams of something, or, then again, they might not—and hover so insistently in this middle ground that they stimulate a multiplicity of interpretations. But unlike a face seen in a cloud or an image in a Rorschach test, Winters's convoluted forms give rise to readings that do not allow the eye to rest on any single aspect, but that may be seen simultaneously. At any given moment, some or all of the following impressions may suggest themselves and then quickly fade, to be replaced by others: maps, blueprints, urban aerial photographs, steel girders, spiderwebs, X-rays, molecular structures, microscopic slides of protozoa, the warp and woof of gauzy fabric, tangles or balls of yarn, fishing nets, the interlace of wintry tree



Graphic Primitives, 8, 1998, from a portfolio of nine woodcuts on Japanese Kochi paper, 20 by 26 inches.

branches, magnified crystals, computer readouts or diagrams of the neurological circuits of the brain, perhaps on information overload. That we can never figure out whether what we're looking at depicts something organic or man-made only adds to the enigma.

Writing about Olafur Eliasson [*A.i.A.*, Oct. '04]—whose work, although sculptural and often architectural in scale, is driven by an interest in surprisingly similar patterns in nature and mathematics—increased my awareness of art that flirts with beauty yet carries the viewer only to the brink of complete esthetic satisfaction. By refusing to go wholly into the realm of sublimity it claims our attention just that much longer. With Winters, we're caught in the ambiguity of the subject matter, but he also maintains our engagement by keeping his means obvious, again like Eliasson. Employing no sleight of hand or overly elaborate technique, Winters doesn't modify his brushstrokes but lets them remain as they were first laid down. With every pass at the canvas evident, it becomes, in his words, "a picture of all the events that went into the making of the painting."¹ This revelation of activity grounds us in the present, as well as adding to the sense of freshness and spontaneity these paintings engender.

For some painters, paint can be almost like a living thing, a willing tool but with inclinations of its own. Always of interest is how much the artist

In making prints, Winters uses the computer not only as inspiration, but also as a tool with which to transfer images to plates.

has agreed to collaborate with the medium, guiding it and allowing it to sing, rather than ignoring its potential or, the opposite, controlling it into complete submission. De Kooning, more than most, exalted in the expressiveness of paint, and this ardor contributes to the magnetism of Winters's work as well. Although the graphic impact is greatest from far away, no matter how close you get, there's always something rich to see.

After the surfeit of coolness and detachment that has characterized much art of the past several years, it's refreshing to encounter work that appears to spring from a real need on the part of the artist to make it. Often we find things that, while lovely to look at, show the artist operating within such narrow parameters, with so little at risk, that it's hard to imagine what drives him, how he manages to get up in the morning. In addition to his obvious love of his medium, Winters may seem to demonstrate the same kind of personal urgency that makes Pollock's and de Kooning's gestural abstraction so satisfying. Yet while he may have adopted something of

Graphics Tablet, 1998, oil and alkyd resin on linen, 96 by 120 inches. Collection Robert and Jane Meyerhoff, Phoenix, Md.



Winters's syncopated visions address the demands of a culture that requires us to assimilate many disparate sensations quickly.

their vocabulary, this is not work generated by an impulse to explore inner emotions and feelings, but originates instead from a need to navigate the more cerebral intersection between nature and technology. Indeed, Winters has described painting as “a method of thinking” and has said that he’s interested in “the way space is generated through thought”² and “how information can be processed as pictorial imagery.”

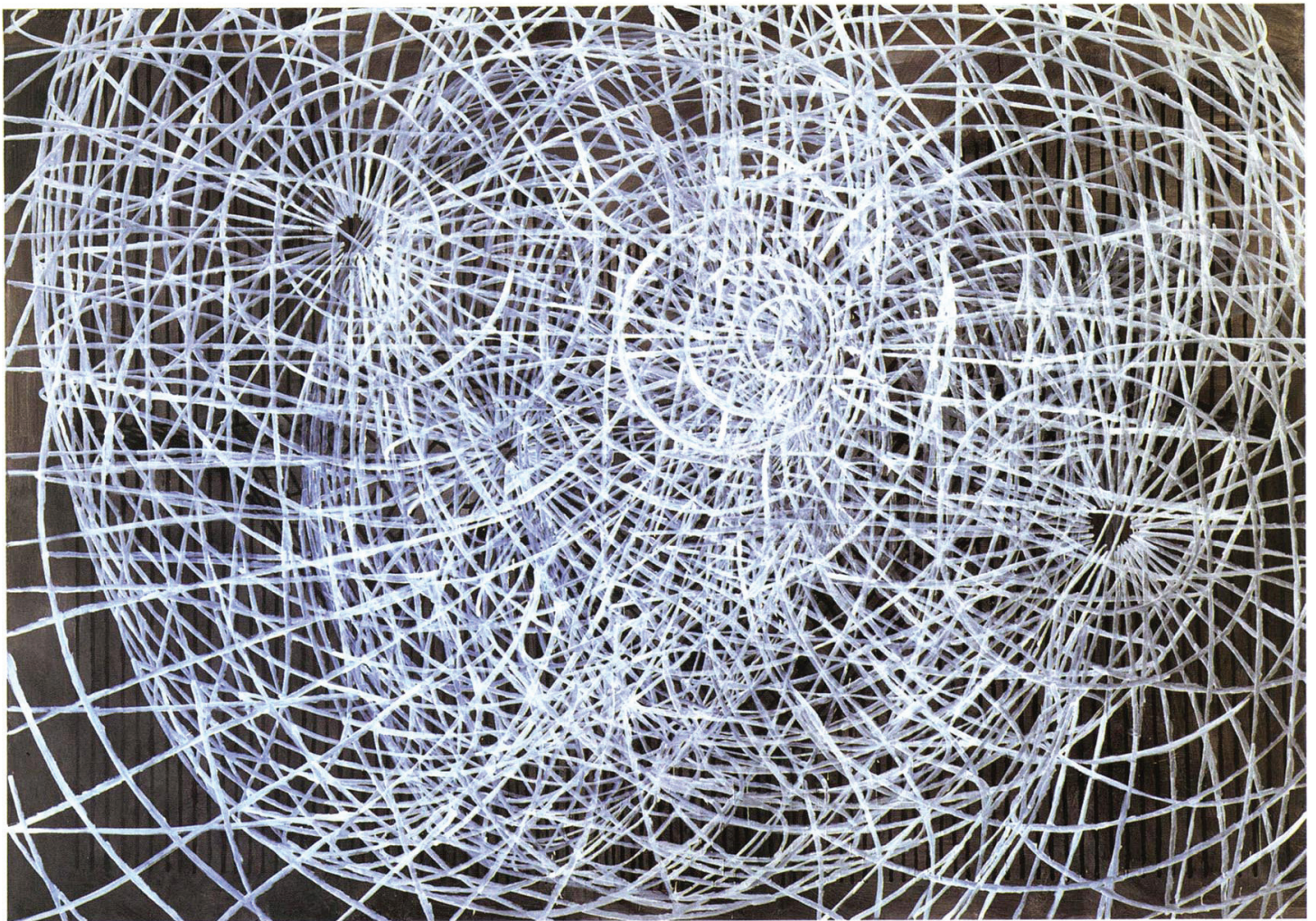
Next to Winters’s work, even the most lyrical gestural abstraction can seem single-minded—a multiplicity of marks adding up to a single sensation. His syncopated visions, by contrast, seek to address the demands of a culture that requires us to assimilate many sensations quickly. That aim first became evident in *Computational Architecture* (1995). In primary colors hovering over white, Winters here laid down angry cross-hatchings interspersed with scrawled spirals, all of which appear to be spinning out of control. The frontmost layer—a large open red grid, configured like the panes of a window and containing the floating red outlines of eight squares—may be read as an attempt to hold everything together. Winters seems to be documenting what it feels like to cope with the neurological shifts that are necessary to accommodate rapidly changing streams of information. His work has a lot to do with the com-

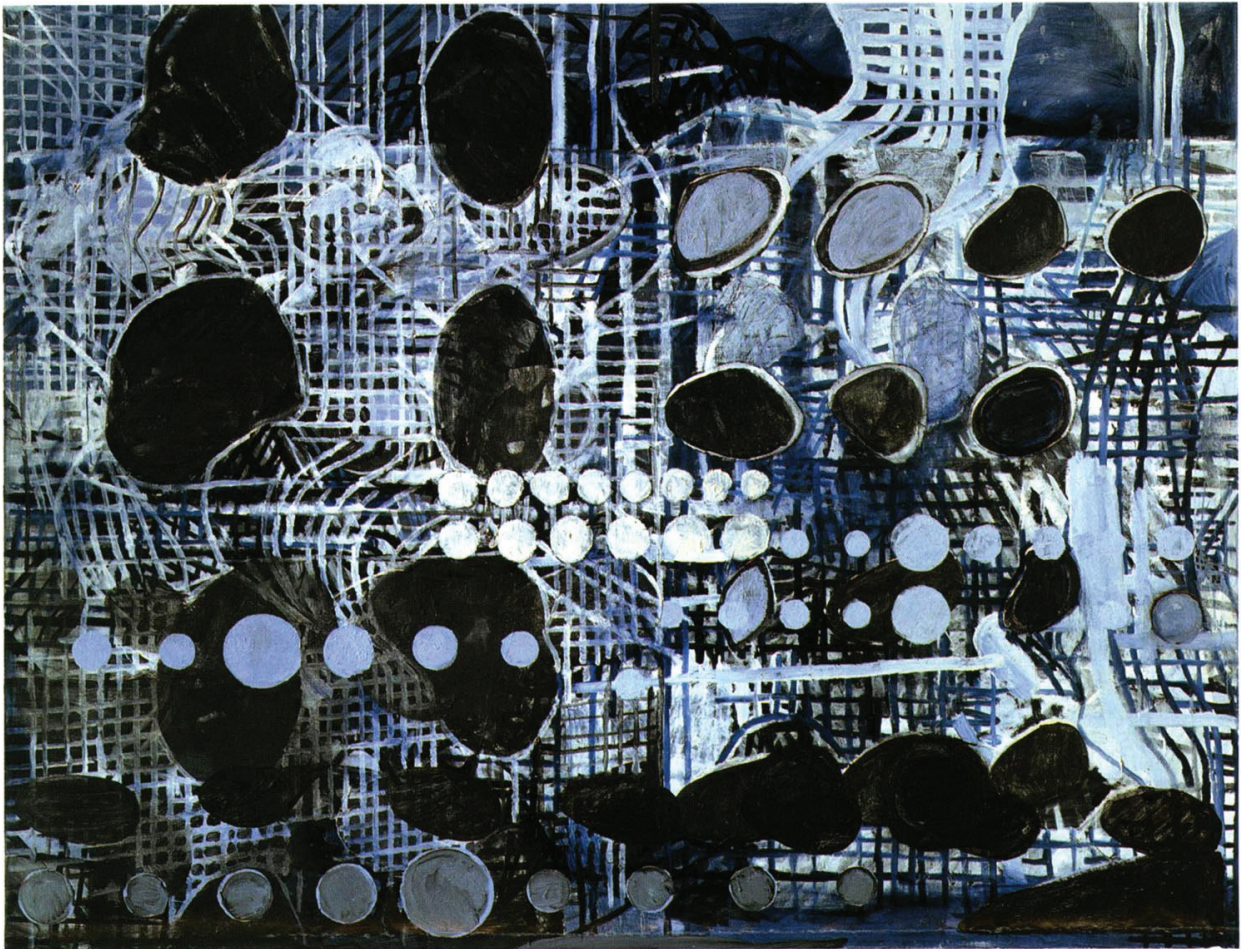
puter’s influence on how we think and see, much as Mondrian, in his time, grappled with the impact of industrialization and urbanization.

Winters often uses computer-generated imagery—mathematics-based systems developed by others for other purposes—as reference or source material, which he then recasts in painting. What attracts him, he says, is “the seamless space that computers are able to create from disparate bits of information—not modernist collage, but a new and uninterrupted expanse.” In making prints, Winters uses the computer not only as inspiration, but as a tool when he transfers images to plates, uses lasers to cut blocks or develops new pictures by stretching and playing with drawings on the screen. As with every technological advance, the computer, he says, “has forced us to consider what nature is, or what natural things are.”

A New York kid who came to his vocation early, attending the High School for Art and Design and later Pratt Institute, where he also studied architecture and industrial design, Winters grew up in the context of the city’s galleries and museums. There he developed his early enthusiasm, still clearly unabated, for the work not only of Mondrian but also of Newman, Pollock and de Kooning. “They invented a world to be explored, not to be moved away from,” he says, “one that’s not exhausted but barely begun, a stepping stone into a place we can’t even imagine yet.” Therefore, although he graduated from art school in 1971, Winters seems to have avoided the whole “painting is dead” *Sturm und Drang* of the ’70s by sticking resolutely to his innermost interests—hence the dark paintings that seem not at all of their time—and coming out the other side better for it. Of his working

Luminance, 2002, oil on linen, 94 1/2 by 133 3/4 inches. Private collection.





Standardgraph/1, 2003, oil on linen, 76½ by 99 inches. Collection Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson.

method, he says, “I try to keep myself a bit off balance in order to achieve results that are unpredictable or unforeseen,” and adds, “it’s only through connection with intuitive or unconscious forces that we contact the fresh and new.”

Regardless, the transition from the nature-derived paintings to Winters’s present format was hardly sudden. In fact its inception might be found in one of his earliest pieces, a breathtakingly intense charcoal drawing titled *Dark Plant 1* (1982), which focuses on a beautiful, yet slightly sinister roselike shape of the blackest black, whose barely perceptible center seems to teem with the force of life. So while Winters’s more diagrammatic work coalesced in the aforementioned *Compositional Architecture*, it had been developing incrementally over a long period of time. In a series of paintings from the early ‘90s, not extensively exhibited in this country, he began to work more abstractly and often in primary colors, gradually emphasizing and magnifying lines and patterns, superimposing one over the other until they became complex schemes that filled the entire canvas. This approach culminated in paintings such as *Graphics Tablet* (1998), which is so congested with activity that the fissure that appears to be opening down the center can be seen as representing a desire for breathing space. Then as now, Winters’s explorations were supported by extensive excursions into printmaking, mixed-medium works on paper, and ink or graphite drawings. It isn’t unusual for him to set himself to the task of making a series of 100 or so related images, leaving the impression that artistic growth, in his case, is often generated through sheer volume.

“Turbulence Skins,” the most recent group of works in this exhibition, presages further shifts in Winters’s evolution, and here he incorporates

some of the language and concerns of his nature-oriented paintings to dynamic ends. In *Standardgraph/1* (2003), he limits himself to three colors: black, white and a predominant blue. The overcharged grid has become not an end in itself, but an animated terrain over which float a number of black, irregular ovoid shapes, which themselves serve as a ground for slightly more regular rows of smaller white and pale-blue disks that drift across the surface like leaves on water. The image adds to Winters’s lexicon of contradictions: if a painting can be at once active and peaceful, this one is.

“There’s nothing to do with painting,” Winters says, “except use it as a place of conjecture.” He describes his own images simply as “abstract pictures of the world,” but they can further be construed as maps of consciousness, charting human responses to an environment that increasingly requires the separation of instinct from intellect, where we’re confronted with such a barrage of information that we don’t even have time to process it. This visceral application of handmade marks to often technical subject matter has the effect of synthesizing otherwise contradictory aspects into a single statement: one that is simultaneously primitive and sophisticated, emotional and analytical, natural and technological, physical and intellectual—an emblem of our time that propels us into the future. □

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are drawn from conversation with the artist.

2. Quoted in Peter Eleey, *The Brooklyn Rail*, October–November 2001, p. 12.

“Terry Winters: Paintings, Drawings, Prints, 1994–2004” appeared at the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass. [Sept. 18, 2004–Jan. 2, 2005], before traveling to the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego [Jan. 23–Apr. 17]. Later this month it moves to the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston [Apr. 30–July 10].

Author: Carol Diehl is an artist who also writes about art.