

M A R G A R E T
T H A T C H E R
P R O J E C T S

Essay by Carter Ratcliff

Face to face with a painting, we want to know first of all how it came into being. We wonder about technique, which is always fascinating, but what we really want to know is how a painter's purpose guides technique. What, for instance, is David Mann doing with his glazes of color? In earlier times, glazes gave luminosity to images of bodies or clouds or even the sky. As fresh as Mann's art is—and it is only in our era that paintings like his are imaginable—he has a connection to this earlier tradition, for his layers of translucent color bring the night sky to mind. Of course, the equivalence isn't perfect. These fields of dark light look more like the grounds of painterly possibility.

Mann's backgrounds absorb his painterly touch into a gleaming smoothness. Asserting its independence, his touch becomes gesture and produces vast populations of swirling, shimmering, flickering shapes. One thinks of teeming biological energy as revealed by the microscope. A macroscopic reading is just as compelling: painting at the scale of cosmography. From the heroic tradition of postwar American abstraction, Mann has learned elasticity of scale. In the pictorial space opened up by Jackson Pollock and Clyfford Still, the infinitely large is the infinitely small—or the other way around. It is up to you, for that is the point of the tradition Mann has extended into the present: to remind you of the freedom you exercise in making sense of what you see. This is the viewer's share of the freedom Mann exercised when he made these paintings.

Smoothed into invisibility, entangled in its own complexity, floating into the stark clarity of total independence—Mann's gesture runs the gamut. Sometimes I focus on a single shape, fascinated by the translucency that lets me read it as flat and, at the same time, as a form driven by its own complexity to deny the very idea of flatness. Widening my focus, I see how these forms interact. Or resist interaction. How the shapes coalesce into patterns or don't. Each painting strikes its own balance between order and randomness (or the appearance of randomness, because everything is deliberate here). At one extreme, *Tonic* has the scattered look of alloverness in the Pollock manner. In *Cluster*, by contrast, I feel that the pulse of pictorial energy is about to settle into a composition—stable and balanced and reassuring.

What reassures us, ultimately, is Mann's command of his medium. His colors are rich, almost iridescent, yet there is something stringent about his deployment of form. With spots of color, he marks the surface of the canvas—rather, he insists that these are canvases, works of art, not pictures of things seen through a lens. All talk of amoebae or galaxies is metaphorical, a roundabout way of getting at the purpose of Mann's luminosity, which is to illuminate our reading. He is one of those artists whose art invites us to see ourselves seeing, and of course there are times when we simply drift into the pleasures of a paradox: the lush stringency of these astonishing canvases.