

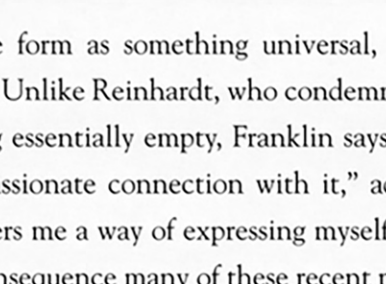
## John Franklin RECENT PAINTINGS

"Art does not render what is visible, art renders visible."  
Paul Klee

Mark Rothko once observed that "...(t)he progression of a painter's work as it travels in time...will be toward clarity...the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, between the idea and the observer." As witnessed to by this current body of work, John Franklin is indeed traveling towards clarity. Back in the heady New York City art scene of the 80s and early 90s Franklin had quickly established himself as an artist whose work was typified by a sensitive intelligence, a dryly irreverent humor, and a "...dead-serious respect for formal values and craftsmanship." (1.) A decade later, these qualities continue to advise his meticulously crafted paintings, but a new dimension of maturity, even vulnerability, make these some of the most revealing and compelling works by the artist to date.

This body of paintings continues Franklin's dialogue with the aesthetic considerations of the Minimalists. But Franklin is neither constrained nor driven by a commitment to any one single movement. His fluid visual vocabulary borrows from many sources as he melds his investigation of color, composition, and form with a craftsman's sensibility and fascination with materials. His paintings become tangible objects inviting touch and investigation. Painstakingly executed, they nevertheless exude a sense of effortlessness, a deceptive simplicity.

Concern with repetition has advised Franklin's work throughout his career. It has assumed various forms in his sculptures and his wrapped "objects," but here, as in earlier paintings, his vehicle of choice is the classic Modernist device: the grid. In a recent conversation, the artist explained that he has been working with the grid since graduate school, and that his attraction to the structure was immediate and intuitive. "I came to Cal Arts with a background in sculpture and furniture making. Painting was completely foreign to me. Now here I was in an environment where everyone talked about their ideas, their concepts. I began studying art seriously for the first time to see what I liked, and all the artists I really responded to Mondrian, Agnes Martin, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Mangold — used some form of the grid."



*Kyoto no Koushijima #10*

While some people experience the grid as being detached, rigidly mathematical, and affectless, Franklin

sees the form as something universal, natural, pure, and even sincere. Unlike Reinhardt, who condemned geometric abstraction as being essentially empty, Franklin says he has "...an emotional, even passionate connection with it," adding that, "...use of the grid offers me a way of expressing myself emotionally on canvas." As a consequence many of these recent paintings are deeply affective and subjective, despite the lack of any referential visual cues.

Franklin clearly takes great pleasure in a direct, physical involvement with his materials and his work. In 1985, he first began wrapping his paintings with inked cotton ribbons (such as those used for manual typewriters and time-clocks.) Those earlier objects, generally worked on shaped canvases and abstracted from specific sources (landscapes, cactus, flags), provided a natural transition for the artist as he moved from a sculptural focus to a greater emphasis on two-dimensional pieces. Today he continues to incorporate commonplace elements — satin ribbons and, more recently, silk chiffon — into his paintings, but there seems to be a richer sensibility, a more deliberate choice in how these elements are applied.

Line is a critical element in these pieces, a fact emphasized by the use of the ribbons. Like many of the Minimalists, Franklin exhibits his paintings unframed, preferring what Robert Ryman described as the "...undiluted aesthetic experience." By leaving the edges of his canvas unpainted Franklin calls even greater attention to the movement of his line as it leaves the surface of the painted canvas and wraps cleanly back, effectively defining the three dimensional space of the work, while anchoring it to the wall.

*Kyoto no Koushijima #10* (1999), one of approximately a dozen paintings created in Japan during the two year period Franklin and his family lived there, presents a grid which uses two different widths of black ribbon woven into a tight pattern of vertical and horizontal rectangles in three sizes. The primary spaces are painted in saturated colors with a subdued autumnal feel. They are counter-balanced rhythmically with spaces composed of smaller rectangles of black, white, and two grays, asymmetrically clustered. The result is reminiscent of Islamic tiles and similar motifs. At the same time the work is somehow unsettling. The eye wants to read the peaceful cadence of the larger color blocks and measured grid, but the movement of white throughout

the painting sets up an opposing dynamic which keeps the viewer engaged if disquieted. It soon becomes evident that the more time a viewer invests in studying the work, the more dimensions of movement will become apparent.

The artist uses the movement of white and black to achieve a vastly different effect in later works such as *Punch and Judy* (2001). Here Franklin, the craftsman, teases the viewer with a canvas which is just shy of being square, although the grid is meticulously symmetrical. The saturated primary colors, pulled about the canvas by blocks of black and white, reinforce the inherent playfulness of the painting, invoking harlequins and circus clowns. Interestingly, while white is once again used effectively here to create a rollicking movement, it is the absence of white in one vertical and two horizontal rows in the center/left of the painting that actually serves to anchor the work and direct the eye.

Franklin has also begun to wrap some of his works in a diaphanous silk. The addition of the fabric significantly changes the relationship of the ribbon and the grid structure to the underlying painting. It also adds a *moiré* effect which creates an illusion of depth and movement while adding a provocative visual element to the surface. In the larger paintings the effect is seductive and distinctly erotic.

The use of the silk also has the unusual effect of personalizing the painting, inferring to it a status as entity, not merely object. Each of the larger paintings (*Black Chiffon*, *Cream Chiffon*, and *Red Chiffon*) — silk-wrapped and girdled in same-colored ribbons — suggests a unique adult personality. In *Black Chiffon* (2001), gossamer thin black silk is stretched tautly across a matte black paint surface and then over the white edges of the canvas. Light catches and reflects the sheen of the woven black satin ribbons as the viewer moves around the painting, creating a soft flickering, a winking element. The overall impression is of barely covered flesh: soft thigh above a stocking, breasts beneath a camisole. While there is a playful element here — perhaps Frederick's of Hollywood in a Martha Stewart guest room — the work also hints at the tenderness and aggression inherent in a sexual act.

Although the larger *Chiffon* works are more overtly erotic, the impact of the smaller, pastel-toned *Hue* canvases is somehow more disturbing. From a distance these works give the impression of being almost

too precious — excessively pretty, gift-wrapped bon bons for the eye. As the viewer comes closer to these paintings, however, the disarming prettiness of the delicate colors lose some of their impact as the tactile reality of fabric and ribbon comes into focus. The softer contrast of the sherbet-colored fabrics now serves to underscore the petiteness and potential vulnerability of the canvases. The ribboned grid begins to feel almost obsessively controlling, the prettiness now hints at possible darker interpretations.

While his masterful use of materials adds unique dimensions to Franklin's work, it is his maturing use of color and facility of application that forms the substance of his art. The way in which he works his paint owes a great deal to minimalist painters such as Ryman and Brice Marden. His is a precise and delicate touch. When combined with the exceedingly flat, densely pigmented "Flash" paint he favors, this serves not only to focus the viewer's attention on the surface of the work, but also to infer an added depth, a dimensionality to it.

It is probably in his three paintings *Royal Pain*, *Joslyn Bled*, and *Black and Blue Mood* (all 2000) that Franklin's sure hand and impressive color sense are most evident. In these color-saturated canvases the artist refrains from quick optical effects, and opts instead for slower vibrant resonance. Franklin uses five consecutively darker values (ranging to a tinted black) of a single intense color, such as the dense brick red of *Joslyn Bled*, to build an extremely rich and luminous color field. The subtlety of the color shifts presents an image that is almost monochromatic, but one that shimmers and pulsates as the viewer watches. Here the grid takes on a supporting role as the colors flow over and under the softened sheen of the lines, and the deft application of the paint itself creates the illusion of silk and depth.

A similar color awareness seems to advise the *Small Soft Silk* series, also painted in 2000. Although the feel is much lighter than the emotionally weighted *Royal Pain*, *Joslyn Bled*, and *Black and Blue Mood*, the *Small Soft* works combine all the strongest elements of Franklin's current body of work to present the effect of intimate visual jewels.

Franklin's work has been referred to as being both poetic and musical. Elements of intelligence, rhythm, and distillation which have suggested those comparisons are still in evidence in his most recent work. But there is also a new clarity, some alchemy of joy and pain clearly achieved through hard experience, and it is shared here with any viewer who will watch and wait.

Tricia Fagan

1. "Wrapped Revelries," 8/21/90 catalogue essay by Jan Cavanaugh, visiting curator, Reed College, Portland, OR.

Tricia Fagan, a freelance curator and writer, is also currently the director of The Gallery at Mercer County Community College in West Windsor, New Jersey.

1. Cover - *Black Chiffon*, 2001, 36x36in., satin ribbons, silk chiffon fabric, vinyl acrylic paint and gesso on cotton

2. *Kyoto no Koushijima #10*, 1999, 35<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>x28<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>in., satin ribbons, vinyl acrylic paint and gesso on cotton

3. *Punch and Judy*, 2001, 30x28in., satin ribbons, vinyl acrylic paint and gesso on cotton

4. *Mint Hue*, 2001, 16x12in., satin ribbons, silk fabric, vinyl acrylic paint and gesso on cotton

5. *Joslyn Bled*, 2000, 33x22in., satin ribbons, vinyl acrylic paint and gesso on cotton

6. *Red Small Soft Silk*, 2000, 16x12in., satin ribbons, silk fabric, vinyl acrylic paint and gesso on cotton

An exhibition checklist is available.

## John Franklin: Recent Paintings

September 13 - October 28, 2001

Greenville Museum of Art  
802 S. Evans Street • Greenville, NC 27834