

birthday in 1948, he apparently saw no reason to depart from the habit of separating vast expanses of color with vertical divisions of one sort or another. Indeed the language he concocted around his art was couched in moral rather than esthetic terms, suggesting that any departure from the simple formula he had uncovered would amount to a failure of responsibility.

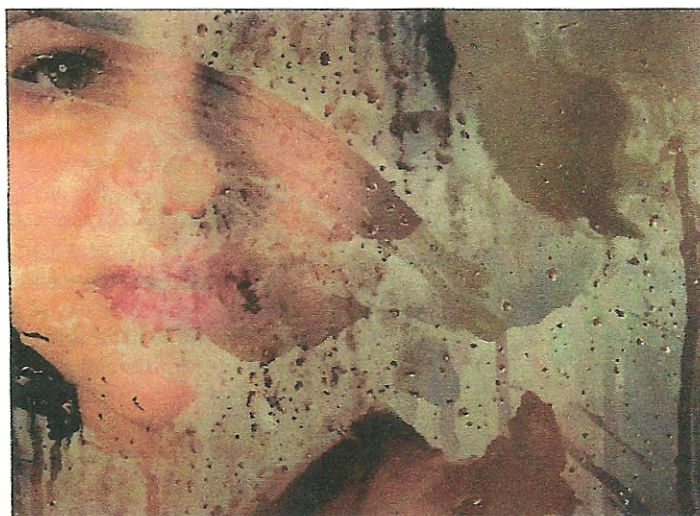
What this two-part exhibition, titled "Playing This Litho Instrument: The Prints of Barnett Newman," furnished, however, was an opportunity to consider one of the very few moments when Newman seriously questioned his belief.

As the gallery's excellent little catalogue informs us, Newman was 56 years old and had just experienced a heart attack and the death of his brother. He was looking mortality square in the face when he decided to try printmaking. No wonder his customary self-confidence deserted him.

To create the beautifully colored lithographs of 1963–64 that he called "Can-

duced the size again—the actual images are often little bigger than postcards—but also abandoned color entirely and replaced his featureless expanses with ones enlivened by cross-hatching, and, unbelievably, polka dots. The results are murky, claustrophobic, and hopelessly flawed. But these etchings are probably among the most genuinely courageous things that Newman ever made.

—Robert Ayers



Alyssa Monks, *Steamed*, 2009, oil on linen, 64" x 86".
DFN.

vincingly at a distance are actually awkward descriptions in white and gray paint of circles, near circles, and a range of increasingly wobbly shapes. And what we perceive as her right ear, rendered in pinks flecked with white and gray, looks more like a poisonous mushroom cap.

The effect here was most entertaining. Monks further played with painterly representation by putting her bathers—whom she consciously relates to art-historical precedents—before the distorting surface of decoratively modulated, steamed-up, or, as in *Smirk*, water-spattered glass. There is more than a hint of titillation here, as there almost always is in paintings of bathing women, but this is so much a part of Monks's intelligent art that it is entirely acceptable.

—Robert Ayers

Alyssa Monks

DFN

Seen in reproduction, Alyssa Monks's paintings have the appearance of soft-porn hyperrealist renderings. Viewed in the gallery, however, they turn out to be something quite different and far more interesting. Monks is anything but a slavish imitator of appearances. Paint for her is simply a neutral means toward achieving a technically accurate representation. At the same time, she toys wittily with its ability to deceive.

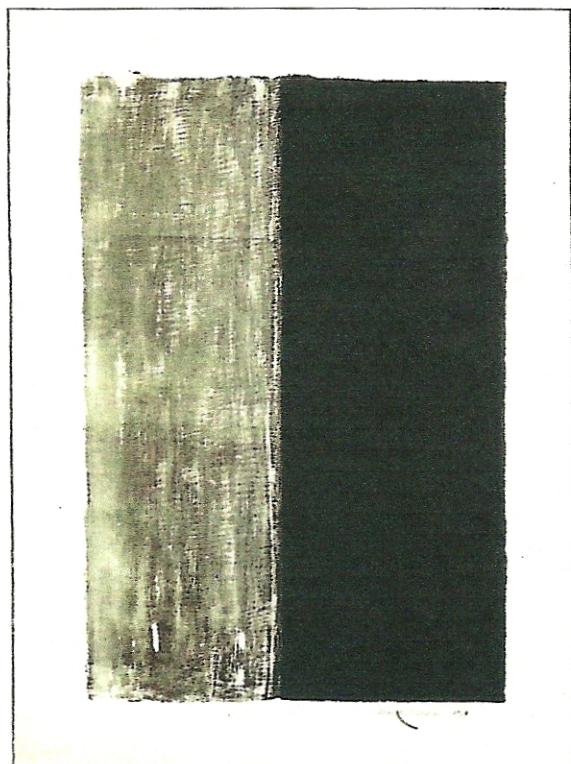
Smirk (2009) is an excellent example of her newest work. At 4 by 5 feet, it is a serious, ambitious painting, but it also shares the humor that flits across the face of the

showering girl who is its subject. We are asked to imagine that this woman is looking at us through her shower door. But the water droplets that read so con-

Ralph L. Wickiser

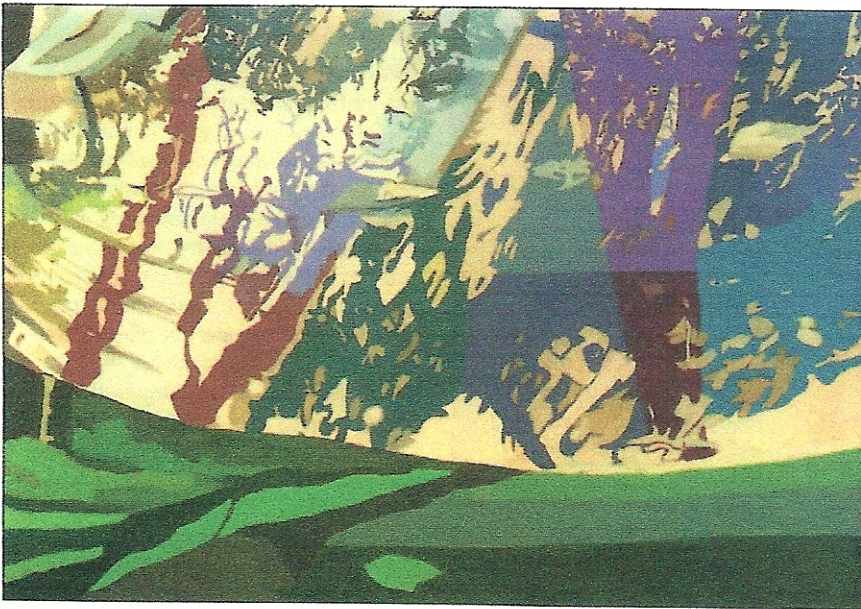
Ruth S. Harley University Center Gallery
Adelphi University, Garden City

These 23 works, by an artist who saw movements come and go in his long career, loosely recorded the course of American modernism while staying true to a singular esthetic. Ralph L. Wickiser (1910–98) experimented with both figuration and abstraction until 1950, when he turned exclusively to nonobjective painting for a period. He produced two notable series during that time—"Compassion I" (1950–58) and "Compassion II" (1959–68)—consisting of works largely inspired by the dramatic tonalities



Barnett Newman, *Untitled*, 1961, lithograph, 24" x 16". Craig F. Starr.

tos," he worked with images that were the same proportions in inches as his earlier works were in feet. Then, for the 1968 etchings "Notes," he not only re-



Ralph L. Wickiser, *Flurries*, 1996, oil on linen, 36" x 50".
Ruth S. Harley University Center Gallery, Adelphi University.

and spirit of Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece. The painting *Red* (1954) exemplifies the artist's use of subtle modulations of rich, thick pigment and a shimmering glaze applied in totemic columns.

In the mid-'60s Wickiser returned to the figure, influenced in part by his association with fellow Pratt Institute faculty members George McNeil, Stephen Pace, and Philip Pearlstein. He continued to be interested in reflections and earthly delights, as in *Blue Triptych, Touching* (1971), in which a nude, modern odalisque, accompanied by an apple, reclines before a mirror, admiring her reflection.

But it was an unexceptional stream, a narrow stretch of clear water some fields beyond his Woodstock, New York, studio, that crystallized Wickiser's modernist approach. Over and over, with a high-speed camera, he captured the quick movement of the water, the light, and the rocks, still-framing nature to abstraction and then translating it into paint. In *Floating Leaves* (1984) and other nonrepresentational images, Wickiser hovers above the riot of autumnal tones and textures while simultaneously diving into its depths. In later works, such as *Green Lawn* (1997), colors and shapes still collide but are more distilled. Throughout the last ten years of his life, Wickiser repeatedly portrayed his backyard apple trees, their limbs caught in cheesecloth. He was fascinated

with conveying the infinite varieties of light and form, and with revealing the mystery in the familiar.

—Deidre S. Greben

Melinda Stickney-Gibson

Kouros

All the paintings in this smart and appealing show were 26 by 22 inches, all were dated 2008, and all were painted in oil on paper. Melinda Stickney-Gibson is an accomplished practitioner of the art of expressive mark-making. She is well versed in post-Cubist, post-Post-Impressionist, and post-Abstract Expressionist rhetorics that make abstraction such a fertile territory for artists of a certain intelligence and sensibility. But unlike some nonrepresentational artists who paint themselves into a stylistic corner, Stickney-Gibson makes paintings in

which pretty much anything is possible.

In a picture like *Prayers & Secrets*, an angry, bloody, red-orange scribble at the right of the picture's middle is offset by a paler, slightly more disciplined orange patch to the left. The darker area is topped by a little pile of penciled-in bricks, while the other has something like a shopping-bag handle attached to it. Although her paintings are strewn with associations of this sort, such fragments serve primarily as compositional reference points rather than specific depictions. But in precisely the same way that a color can suggest emotional pitch, or a type of paint handling can hint at agitation or calm, these little elements of a representational language are able to inflect our readings of Stickney-Gibson's pictures and provide clues to their ambitions.

Despite their relatively small size and modest materials, these are paintings that seek to address big issues. An artist who calls a picture *Prayers & Secrets* is clearly interested in something more significant than pleasing arrangements of paint, and this territory of utter



Melinda Stickney-Gibson, *Prayers & Secrets*, 2008, oil on paper, 26" x 22".
Kouros.

abstraction and fragmentary image-making is about as difficult a one as a painter can steer herself into.

—Robert Ayers