

Paul Pagk at Thread Waxing Space

This exhibition contained a few of what seem to be breakthrough paintings, works in which the artist, by dint of excruciatingly patient labor, has achieved things in his work he cannot have expected. Such breakthroughs are difficult for any artist and especially for one like Paul Pagk, who practices a narrowly defined, historically burdened, highly exacting kind of art. Pagk's abstract paintings, with their constant format of two-color figure/ground geometry, tend to focus artist and viewer on small variations, making the advent of any new motif, however minor, seem of great importance. Change thus tends to be incremental. Pagk is one of those artists who makes progress by banging his head against the wall for as long as it takes to dislodge a few bricks, the kind of artist Picasso probably had in mind when he made his dismissive comment: "I don't search, I find." But sometimes those who search also find.

Over the last two years Pagk's forms have both shrunk and expanded. The once blocky alphabetlike forms have thinned to the point of becoming slim lines, while the ground, once nearly equal in surface space to the figures, has grown to occupy most of the canvas. The lines seem to be measuring off and bracketing the ground, as if surveying it for some mystical construction project. These lines, particularly when they end at top or bottom with truncated 45-degree angles or half-circles, also suggest musical notation, so that they are "compositions" in two senses of the word.

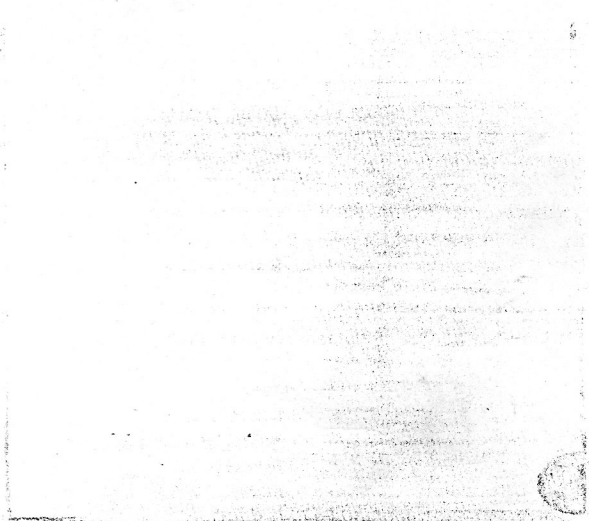
In several of the most recent paintings these slimmed-down lines have vanished completely, washed over by the endless striations of the ground color. Perhaps the best painting in the show, an untitled 72-by-100-inch work on linen, presents a subtly modulated pink ground whose too-sweet beauty suggests

some pollution-enhanced sunset over Los Angeles. (Actually, the painting unexpectedly echoes the background sunsets of Ed Ruscha.) Here the characteristic forms—an extended L on the left, a kind of half-note on the right—are still present, just. They persist as ghostly supports of Pagk's new discovery, a seductively rippling paint surface whose subtle modulations—achieved with countless broad sweeps of the brush—vary like the tooth of a velvety cloth.

In an unexpected touch of humor, another of the newer paintings had a sphere hovering in its center, like something that had drifted out of a Walter Murch painting. This again showed Pagk's perhaps newly acquired willingness to surprise himself.

Paul Pagk speaks, rightfully, of the modesty of his work, but he also speaks about how his paintings are "slow" and reveal themselves only with long or repeated viewing. There seems an obvious contradiction here. To solicit large amounts of a viewer's time is hardly an act of modesty. Yet it is a mark of Pagk's ability that his work is capable of overcoming such contradictions, that his lessons in pure geometry are also occasions for pure pleasure.

—Meyer Raphael Rubinstein



Paul Pagk: Untitled, 1993, oil on linen, 72 by 100 inches; at Thread Waxing Space.