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GALLERY  
WATCHAbstraction's  
remarkable  
return

**A**BSTRACT painting's reinvigoration is the most remarkable comeback story in contemporary art. Right now in San Francisco galleries there are a number of shows that feature various strains of the new abstract painting.

The kind of abstraction New York veteran painter **Louise Fishman** practices isn't all that new, but its connection to abstract expressionism, the mid-century movement that made New York City the art capital of the world, doesn't mean that it isn't vital. Fishman's new paintings, at **Gallery Paule Anglim**, 14 Geary St. through May 29, are so fresh that you might not think about their lineage until after you have savored their color, rigorous structure and lively paint handling.

Fishman's paintings are based on the record of paint left by exercise of hand, wrist and arm gesture. Fishman's gestures tend to be large, generous and slow, but they are also somewhat constrained and cut off.

Thick, vigorous but short, her gestural traces draw attention to their physical characteristics. In a way, they are as much like the frozen gestures painted in parody of abstract expressionism by pop artist Roy Lichtenstein as they are like the paintings of second generation abstract expressionists who worked in the late '50s that they initially recall.

Look at "Blue to Blue." At first appearance a classic gestural-school abstract expressionist painting, it is a loose weave of bold blue and green strokes over patches of sienna and ivory. But its rather tight proportions, 47 inches square, hold it back from all-out ab-ex expressionism.

Fishman tends to create encrusted surfaces — for instance, "Rosa Chinesis," a richly tactile painting of thickly slathered terra cotta and dark blue oil — over a shallow space made by scraping away layers of paint to form a multicolored skin. Following formalist dictum, these paintings are resolutely flat. When you look into them, there is no suggestion of the infinite space you find in a Pollock drip painting.

Color distinguishes Fishman's paintings. In two paintings, "Unfeathered Blue" and "August," the dominant colors tend toward blue and green, but when compared, the color harmonies established in each differentiate them.

In the smaller gallery, five watercolors find Fishman working more loosely. In some, references to Chinese calligraphy are stronger than memories of abstract expressionism.

"Color Based Painting/High Modernism," at the **Patricia Sweetow Gallery**, 49 Geary St. through



"Blue to Blue" by Louise Fishman, at Gallery Paule Anglim

June 12, could serve as a primer in monochrome painting to those who need a guide. And that means just about everyone.

In recent years, the monochrome, the radically reductive work that marks the ground zero of modernist painting, has moved in from the margins of painting practice to occupy the center. Practiced wherever the Western painting tradition endures, contemporary monochrome painting at its best cleanses the eye from the confusions of living in and looking at a media-saturated visual world.

The Sweetow show features work by six German and American monochromists, including some of the best. To those who give it time, it can be very satisfying.

With painting reduced to essentials — color, surface texture and shape — no fooling around is allowed. Every decision reveals the identity of the painting's maker, even though most of this work is ideologically opposed to painting as self-expression.

Compare just three paintings, **Joseph Marioni's** "Red Painting," **Phil Sims' "Untitled Yellow"** and **Peter Tollens' "275/98."**

Marioni's painting is blood red (although if you look at it from a radical angle, it appears to be violet). His acrylic is glossy, and it leaves its traces as it courses down the length of the canvas to form an uneven crust at the bottom. In its irregular flow, the paint lets the dark underpainting show, especially near the bottom.

Sims' tall matte-yellow painting is initially dull. But if you look at it from an angle, you notice that pigment has been (relatively) roughly applied to the surface in horizontal patches, creating a subtly patterned texture.

Tollens' small blue (on black/green) painting is all texture. Its surface is rough like cheaply applied plaster, but it catches light — its purpose — like nothing else.

I realize that each of these descriptions sounds particularly unpersuasive — this is painting to experience not read about — but they indicate some of the variety that exists among the best monochrome painters.

And time is essential to viewing this kind of work. If you're impatient, you might walk in and out of the gallery without seeing anything more than a number of single-colored rectangles on the wall. But if you slow down and look, the paintings will open up. And you might have the rare experience of using your eyes to see rather than merely to receive readymade images forced onto your retina.

(The implicit opposition of contemporary monochrome paintings to media-based images helps differentiate it from similar explorations in monochromism by Kasimir Malevich in Russia in the early days of the century and Ad Reinhardt in New York in the 1940s and '50s.)