Nicolas de Staël: *Méditerranée*, 1954, oil on canvas, 37¾ by 57⅛ inches; at Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

Paris and at the height of his fame.

Many have thought de Staël's abstract "Compositions" to be his best paintings. The early-'50s works from the series seen in this show are characterized by a thick application of paint and a gridded structure. The paint-handling recalls the physicality of Jean Fautrier's canvases, but de Staël's palette is more venturesome, incorporating both Fautrier's muted shades and the pure, sun-drenched colorations of Matisse. One of the most beautiful works of this series is *Composition in Grey, Beige and White*, where a wonderful gray-green seems to have taken the place of the beige indicated by the title.

As the '50s progressed, de Staël's paintings became more and more openly representational and his pigments thinner. His later landscapes and seascapes often contain discordant juxtapositions of brilliant hues, as in *Agrigente*, where an arrangement of triangles and parallelograms painted in hot orange, red, yellow, purple and white is used to evoke a hill town smoldering under a pitiless summer sky. By way of contrast, *Méditerranée* breaks like a wave of cool sea water, a tumbled mix of whites and blues contrasted with the high glare of red and yellow. *Paysage*, a small, shimmering scrap of a painting, consists of a few heavily loaded strokes of pale, tremulous blue over a sliver of deep blue, suggesting a big sky and low horizon in the manner of Caspar David Friedrich.

Although some of the paintings in this show now look dated or irresolute, many of de Staël's canvases hold up unexpectedly well. The passion that went into their making is still present. At an impasse in his work, the artist killed himself in 1955 at the age of 41, hurling himself over the terrace of his studio in Antibes. His reputation in the intervening years has largely collapsed, although he continues to have a small, devoted following. Often considered a painter's painter, de Staël possessed an intense love for his medium that is everywhere apparent in his art. *—Lilly Wei*

Jake Berthot at McKee

The frontier between representational painting and abstraction has never been impassable. Think of de Kooning's women, Fairfield Porter's domestic scenes that also succeed as painterly abstractions or Diebenkorn's many works that play both sides of the fence. Even so, the crossover achieved by Jake Berthot in these new paintings seems to have taken his admirers by surprise. Gone are the brushy fields of oil paint overlaid with abstract figures embodying a private mythology. In their place, we have a series of landscapes (in oil), along with a group of graphite drawings—the result, apparently, of the artist's decision to leave New York and move to the Catskills last year.

Another surprise is the radical reversion to Cézanne, to whom Berthot plays explicit homage in *Field Stream and Black Oak*, adapting to his purpose not only the master's characteristically mild blues and greens, but also his brushwork. It's as though the elder hand has reached across a century and deployed a series of rapid parallel strokes, fanned out to render a tree that becomes a sort of French hybrid. Elsewhere the Cézanne influence is detectable mainly in Berthot's Platonist ambition to discover a geometric order in outdoor subjects, this time without the artificial boost of architecture or the lines and angles of mountain geology. One of the paintings is a seascape at sunset, otherwise Berthot gives us partly wooded level plains or lone, foregrounded trees. In several of the works, he begins by ruling a graphite grid on the gessoed canvas so that, through a thin layer of applied paint, it is still visible when the work is complete. Tree crowns are rendered in flat outline, the foliage not depicted, and with only an occasional branch limned in to suggest a supporting armature. The trunks of the trees, however, are fully volumetric and lend a reassuring solidity to the design.

Jake Berthot: *Cummins Ridge*, 1997, oil on wood panel, 18 by 23⅞ inches; at McKee.

Is Berthot trying to jump the track of art history and pretend the post-Cézanne revolution never occurred? No, not in *Cummins Ridge*, which is constructed with dual vanishing points, one alley of trees receding to the left, another to the right—a stereo version of Renaissance perspective. Some of the graphite tree studies recall Barnett Newman's insistent verticals, along with his ambiguous rendering of negative and positive space. Still, this show isn't likely to appeal to the part of the art public that expects confrontation, satire and nightmare. Berthot's ambitions are quieter than that; finally they have less to do with mathematics and art history than with a concern to offer sites for meditation, woodland "cathedrals" containing a space alive with mysterious correspondences between the visible and the invisible.

—Alfred Corn

Paul Feeley at Lawrence Markey

When Paul Feeley died in 1966 at the age of 56, his paintings and sculptures were the subject of a memorial exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum. For no good reason I can think of, his work has since dropped from many people's consciousness. This small but riveting exhibition of 16 watercolors, mostly from 1964, suggested the importance of Feeley's achievement, while also offering a glimpse into his artistic process.

Primarily a painter, Feeley favored canvases in which simple geometric forms are deployed singly or in repeating groups. He used upright barbell or baluster shapes, oblongs that resemble peanuts, small solid-looking arches and wavy-contoured squares and rectangles. Fascinated with modularity, Feeley often surrounded his forms with white bands and colored borders that echo the contours of the central shape. While the paint handling in his work is always restrained and stencils were used to repeat forms, Feeley is not a "hard edge" painter; his geometry is too clearly of the handmade variety. The solid colors (predominantly red, blue, green, orange) are usually limited to two colors on a white ground, although the watercolors often use more hues per composition than the pantings.

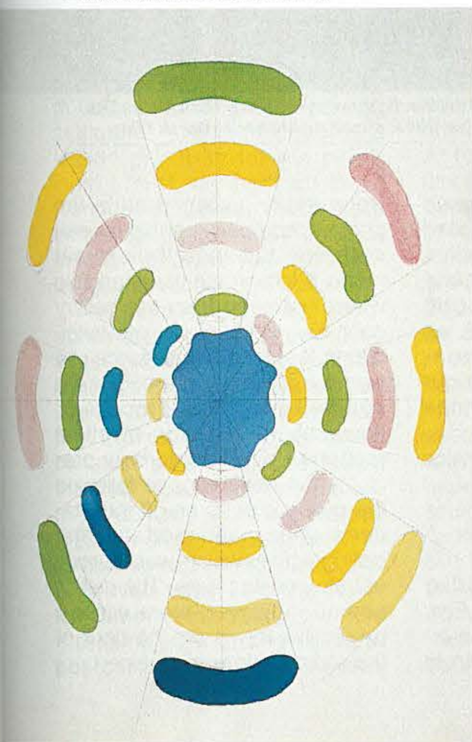
At once serene and active, Feeley's apparently simple compositions incorporate a wealth of visual subtleties and ideas. He was superbly sensitive to the interactions between the contours of paired shapes and to ambiguities between figure and ground. With their sleek, elongated contours, the geometric

elements in his paintings clearly evoke Cycladic art. Feeley was also affected by the decorative patterns of North African architecture. Alongside these Mediterranean influences are more down-to-earth associations of playing cards and the game of jacks. Toward the end of his life, Feeley began to experiment with sculpture, creating freestanding symmetrical structures in painted wood. One of his late works was a 6½-foot-high jack made of fiberglass covered with gold leaf.

The watercolors in this show offered an excellent introduction to Feeley's vocabulary and compositional process. Despite their close relationship to the paintings, the watercolors were made as works in their own right and not as preparatory studies. It's a measure of Feeley's prowess as a visual thinker that these modestly scaled works (none is larger than 17 by 12 inches) are so completely engaging. An untitled piece from 1964 slowly ensnares the viewer with systematically varied rings of pink, green, blue and yellow peanut-like shapes around a central blue form. In a related work, another blue form with scalloped edges is hemmed in by a ring of small yellow, orange and green oblongs. Pencil lines radiating from the center neatly skewer each one of the colored shapes.

As nearly always with Feeley, the composition is a fine mixture of formal discipline and sheer playfulness, of archetypal pattern and 20th-century style. A decade ago, when one of Feeley's motifs turned up in the work of then-appropriationist Philip Taaffe, the latter seemed to be mocking the earnestness of Feeley and his generation. I wonder, in 30 years will Taaffe's recent large-scale paintings have the staying power of these enthralling watercolors?

—*Raphael Rubinstein*



Paul Feeley: Untitled, 1964, watercolor and pencil on paper, 17¾ by 12 inches; at Lawrence Markey.

Susan Rothenberg at Sperone Westwater

After a long absence from the New York scene, Susan Rothenberg returned with paintings that retain the labored strokes and clotted surfaces of her previous work while exploring new subjects and more complex compositions. Along with her familiar fragmented human and animal forms, she has introduced human heads, and with them a new degree of self-consciousness. In some cases the heads seem to function as impassive observers, as in *Canadian Geese*, in which a large rudimentary face hovers in a corner above a departing flock. In others, isolated heads float in a flickering ether. In a group of paintings dedicated to poker games, they are participants in the action.

The addition of the heads introduces a narrative component into Rothenberg's work. Similarly, the emphasis on poker suggests allegorical possibilities. In the poker paintings, disembodied heads and hands, viewed from above, hover over tables scattered with spread-out hands of cards. In one of these works, the center of the table is piled with loose arms and legs, while the player's heads and hands are relegated to the edges of the canvas. In others, heads bend intently over the flat plane of the table as if they have become the gaming elements. Is Rothenberg making a statement about the unavoidability of chance? Or is she just showing how one spends quiet evenings in the country?

Susan Rothenberg: *White Poker*, 1997, oil on canvas, 87 by 113 inches; at Sperone Westwater.

Rothenberg does not seem to have fully resolved the tension between her narrative impulses and her ongoing exploration of the dissolution of form. The fractured animal and human figures in previous work required no explanations as they hovered between abstraction and representation. But here, with the table set for the evening's entertainment, it is hard not to ask why there is a mound of body parts.

As a result, the most successful works are those without the human referent. A lovely piece titled *Pink Paths* is scattered with quickly rendered farm animals. Rabbits, dogs and horses threaten at times to disappear into the welter of muted pastel brushstrokes. The whole painting has a remarkable feeling of generative motion, as recognizable forms flash in and out of existence. Similarly, the elongated necks and extended wings of the birds in *Canadian Geese* seem to surge through space, breaking through a curdled ground which suggests swirling snow or heavy fog. The face in the corner seems extraneous, at best.

Rothenberg is clearly striving to move beyond the work for which she received so much attention in the 1980s. Some of the ingredients are here, but she's not quite cooking yet.

—*Eleanor Heartney*

Sergei Bugaev (Afrika) at I-20

One of a group of Leningrad—now St. Petersburg—nonconformist artists who became active prior to perestroika, Sergei Bugaev goes by the name Afrika. He has performed in films, absurdist ballets and with the experimental orchestra Pop Mekhanika; hosted a radio program called "Three Piglets"; designed sets for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company; and edited *Kabinet*, a journal of science and art. He has shown his work in venues ranging from the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts and the Pori Art Museum in Pori, Finland, to P.S. 1 and the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Alla Rosenfeld, writing about Afrika in *From Gulag to Glasnost: Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union* (1995), describes his art as combining "images drawn from the Russian avant-garde culture of the 1920s, Soviet mass media of the Stalin period, and Western Postmodernism, using found materials, posters, and photographic images." Ever evolving, Afrika's recent work consists of elaborate rebuses created by engraving on galvanized copper or on copper over silicone. Six pieces from 1995-97, including the monumental *Big Aphasia*, were included in this show, "Rebus II: Works on Copper."

You might, on the basis of this work, make Afrika out to be a somewhat somber study. Although polished to a bright sheen in some places, these copper pieces have for the most part a dark countenance, tarnished and acid-stained. They resemble sections of a wall in a manufacturing facility upon which workers have been inscribing their images for eons, creating a