

ART IN REVIEW

Al Loving: ‘Torn Canvas’

By ROBERTA SMITH

*Garth Greenan Gallery
529 West 20th Street, Chelsea*

Through Dec. 29



Untitled (c. 1974–1975)

In the early 1970s the African-American artist Al Loving (1935–2005) dismayed some of his admirers (and his dealer) when he abandoned his crisp geometric style of painting in an attempt, as he later told an interviewer, to find out “whether there is black art and what it looks like.” He turned to more relaxed, loquacious works made from torn strips of canvas stained with paint, pieced together using a sewing machine and hung on the wall like raggedy, rich-hued banners. Five examples, dating from 1973 to 1975, form the heart of this beautiful show.

Incorporating diagonal or crisscrossing or even curlicue pieces of canvas, these efforts may well demonstrate what one kind of black art could look like. They suggest free-form quilts at which African-American women often excelled, handmade raiment of the type a village leader in Africa might wear on ceremonial occasions, and tents or shelters made in resource-conscious cultures in which (unlike our own) nothing goes to waste. These radiant pictorial objects speak several languages, conversing with all kinds of textile arts and crafts, for example. And in some ways they go deeper into orthodox abstraction than Loving’s hard-edge works did, both partaking of it and satirizing it.

They borrow from Color Field painting and join the debate about shaped canvases with works that are built from the inside out. They parry with Frank Stella’s “Polish Village” reliefs, and find common cause in the unstretched canvases of Alan Shields, Sam Gilliam and Joe Overstreet. Their effulgent surfaces evoke different times, places and art forms, expressing a multivalent consciousness that could be called postmodern.