



Cornelia Schulz



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Cornelia Schulz:
Watching for the Third Event
by Renny Pritikin

"...the struggles that his mature abstract canvases would pose: How to keep the surface and the picture space alive without imagery, how to create an internal harmony of color, density, and structure, persuasive to the eyebut without a suffocating control."

—Kenneth Baker, *SF Chronicle*,
on Richard Diebenkorn, July 26, 2008

When asked who was her strongest influence, Cornelia Schulz replies enthusiastically and immediately, across the gap of half a century,

"Diebenkorn." After some reflection, she adds, "My first influences were the Abstract Expressionists working in New York. My early painting was often associated with Hans Hoffman, his push/pull of organic abstraction and geometric form. For me the influence from Diebenkorn was about his process of searching and distilling." The meaning of influence to an artist can be so personal as to be untranslatable to us on the outside; sometimes as well an artist can claim an influence that has more to do with an emotional relationship than any actual traceable presence in the work. However, Schulz's work clearly does, like Diebenkorn's, wrestle with problems inherent to formal abstraction. Schulz herself offered, in a recent conversation, the following concerns:

"I am always looking at the building blocks of form: shape, color contrast, value, line, and texture, but I am watching for that 'third event' so to speak, which arises out of them and acts to transcend [mere] formal arrangement."

Born in 1936 in Pasadena, she studied in Southern California at Pasadena City College and the Los Angeles County Art Institute (now Otis) through 1957. She took a summer course from Diebenkorn in '57. Schulz had the good fortune to meet a number of teachers and peers at that time—while still an undergraduate—who included legendary ceramicist Peter Voulkos and many of his students, most only a few years older than Schulz and destined to become magnetic forces themselves. This included Kenneth Price, now famous for his painted, biomorphic abstract ceramics; John

Mason, known for expanding clay's reach to include monumental and conceptual approaches; and Paul Soldner, credited with the innovative American raku style. Since clay has never been her medium, what was Schulz drawn to in these men's work? What Schulz referred to in conversation is "not content but attitude; pulling out all the stops." Certainly Voulkos and his students were recreating the possibilities for ceramics, and that energy, that seriousness and confidence must have been intoxicating for a still-impressionable young artist from Pasadena.

As a young person, having completed her AA degree from Pasadena City College and spent two years at the LA County Art Institute, Schulz made an existential decision to try something else with her life beside art, if only as a test, before completely committing to a life in the arts. She found work in a private mental hospital in Connecticut for ten months, after which she opted to take up a scholarship she had won for free art school tuition for one semester, and selected the San Francisco Art Institute.

She completed both her undergraduate and graduate degrees there from 1958 through 1962. In teachers like the figurative abstractionists Elmer Bischoff and Frank Lobdell, and fellow students such as William T. Wiley and Robert Hudson, Schulz rediscovered the passion she found so inspirational in Voulkos's circle. She received her BFA in painting, and then shifted her attention to receive her MFA in welded steel sculpture. Marriage to Hudson and the start of a family came after graduation, putting her art career on hold for most of the following decade. Though Schulz has lived almost all of her adult life in Northern California—a friend and colleague of many of the region's art world luminaries—she has remained aesthetically a Southern Californian, exploring abstract painting in ways that have always been more acceptable in the South than in political, experimental Northern California.

With the eventual breakup of her marriage, Schulz began, in 1970 at the age of 34, to rededicate herself to painting and in 1973 to a long and distinguished teaching career at UC Davis that continues to the present time on an emeritus basis. The same dogged exploration of painting that Schulz has demonstrated as an artist soon surfaced in her career as an educator. She was the first tenured woman on that notable male faculty. She was recognized by being named chair of the art department from 1988 to 1992 and was one of the University's Distinguished Public Service Award winners in 2000, for bringing to Davis the landmark K-12 arts outreach program, ArtsBridge, that sees UC students teaching in the community.

From the time of her recommitment to art making in 1969 and 1970, until the current phase using shaped canvases, which began in the mid-

nineties, Schulz painted on traditional rectangular stretched canvases. "I spent seventeen years evolving a process of organic, controlled accident, interrelating with geometric form," she explains. Looking at *Diamond Works* (1980), halfway through this time period, we see a kind of three-quarter aerial elevation of an architectural construction in paint. Viewed this way, there is a vivid diagonal movement from the upper right corner down to the lower left. Sidewalks for the eye—some elevated over "gardens"—are constructed along transparent and translucent walls and doorways. At the bottom right a slightly incongruous black vertical rectangle is the ground for a tricolor braided



ribbon, leading the eye down below ground level. Except for this area's maroon—and a couple of black—rectangles, the palette is made up of cheerful pastels and cloudy whites. Color fields of blue are usually disrupted by sprays and drips of floral reds, yellows and greens. Outside the central image the "walkways" are various muted shades of pink and blue green. Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park # 27* (1970), from the collection of the Brooklyn Museum,

participates in many of the same visual gymnastics, though I prefer to read this work as more of an architectural section, as opposed to Schulz's bird's eye view. That is, these Diebenkorns can be read as exercises in taking the utmost care while looking through a window, at a landscape. Diebenkorn's painting bends toward us along the boundary of the white vertical boulevard that stretches from the top center and ends at the bottom right. In Schulz's piece, the division down the center of the piece forms a hinge in the center of the painting while at the same moment it deliberately undercuts the illusion of depth and instantly flattens the painting out. An interesting coincidence is the presence in the Diebenkorn work's center left of two thin, pencil-line like, marks against a white ground, while Schulz's braided device serves a similar disruptive, eye-catching purpose.

Frank Stella is credited with initiating the use of shaped canvases in contemporary art. At the seminal 1965 exhibition, *Shape and Structure*,

at Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York, critics saw such works as a generational swing away from the operatic excesses of Abstract Expressionism, into a more formal phase in the exploration of abstraction, which certainly jibes with Schulz's work. In the ensuing decades Elizabeth Murray has been the most discussed practitioner of shaped canvases. Murray was known for the way her shapes impacted the perception of her surfaces as well as how the contours added a sculptural meaning. Though Schulz acknowledges that Murray was often an inspiration for her shaped canvases, their painting styles differed greatly. If Schulz's works are less rigid and more improvised than Stella's, they are smaller, more segmented, less casual and more quietly formal than Murray's.



Schulz began working with shaped canvases around 1994. She builds her stretcher-bars and surfaces them with wooden panels, then stretches the canvas over that structure, applying several coats of gesso. Each coat is sanded to arrive at the desired receptive surface.

It's important to note that these canvas building blocks are painted separately, and "become paintings in their own right," as Schulz adds, before being joined together. For the artist, the collisions she sets up among these disparate elements is the heart of what she is after, enabling the viewer to have the opportunity to discover "connecting and unifying principles." The paintings become the record of the artist using all the means at her disposal to create meaning among the juxtaposed various shapes of canvas, and the unlimited complexity of the painted surface, including the shadow cast, making a visual transition to the wall.

Starting in 2007, Schulz has been drawn to a recurring motif, an el-shaped figure, often with longish horizontal and parallel elements. This dynamic internal structure, with all its tangents and ramifications, forms the starting point for many in the series of works produced that year. The works have a color palette







that is dominated by black and the gentlest possible yellow; her paint is usually applied flat, though there are several dramatic exceptions.

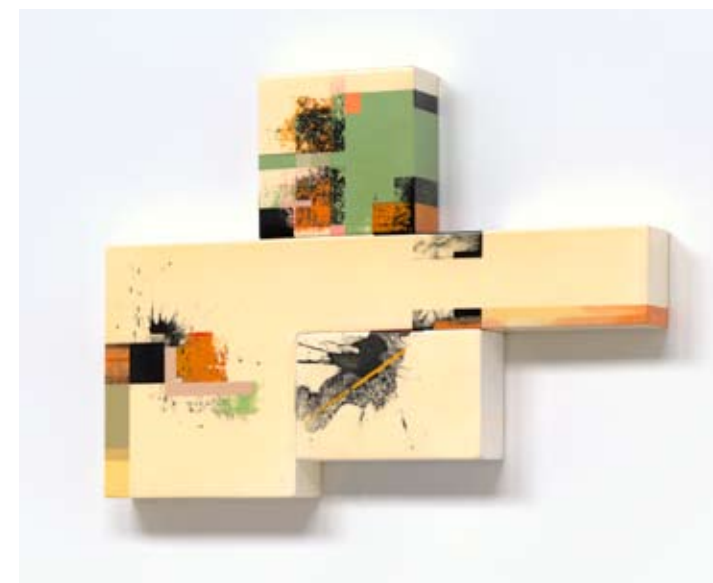
Paintings are traditionally made up of four corners, four edges, and a surface. While artists must fence with each of four corners in a perpetual duel, the surface of the work has its own, separate delights (unsullied open space!) and concomitant problems, as do the edges (which are partly corners and partly surfaces). In this exhibition's universe of roughly fifteen paintings, one of Schulz's ambitions is to temper the self-regard of right angles, to negotiate their obstinate simplemindedness and find a way for them to better work and play with other parts of the paintings.

Bold Over can be closely considered, as a tool for beginning to look at the whole series of paintings. It's a taxonomy of ways to respond to the opportunities that arise while painting (and by extension, all manner of formal concerns). A mottled brown and black square that is the work's asymmetric center has two feet extended off the dock into space; the brown corners are highlighted, dramatized against whatever white the gallery wall contains. The upper right corner is again hard-edged, but softened by pairing with two off-whites: one almost cement color and the other a hint



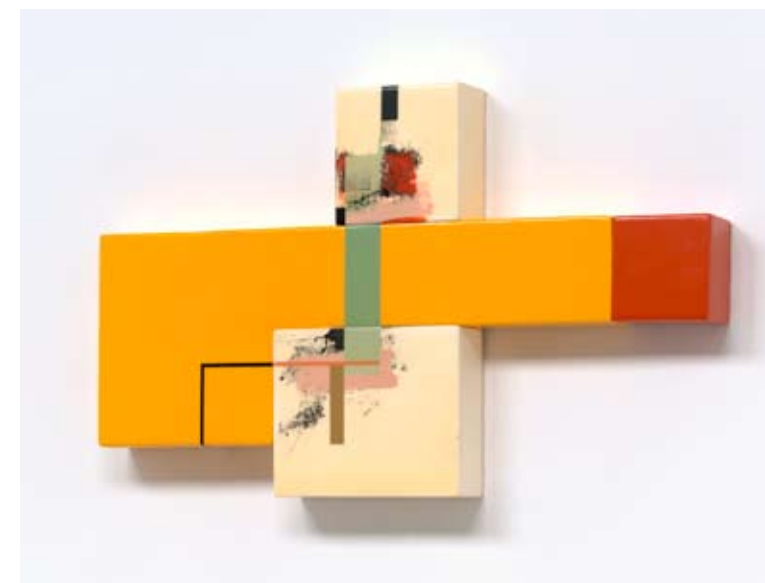
at an upcoming very soft buttery yellow continuum that builds as the eye moves to the right. If the upper and lower left are offered as one extreme (against whiteness) then the fourth corner's placement is a demonstration of its opposite: it's in an absolute blackness that opens its maw over the brown square, while the square and its corner points downward into the depths of the rounded opaque object. Schulz also has other solutions: a virtual disappearance of a corner as an image or passage melds into painted unity with a neighboring shape, or a conversation using the language of color among bordering squares. The sweetest invention of the work is a long narrow strip of almost-white gray that abuts a slightly grayer, curving element to its left; it is parallel to and below another absent edge above it that would extend the upper right of the painting an inch, if it existed.

Jolie Laide, while still flat, stands out for its molten red and orange, in which the artist sets up a tension between the volcanic eruption on the canvas and the severely sectioned glimpse we get of it through a series of right-angled turns. A small rectangle, brown with hints of blue and orange, serves as a hurricane eye, calmly anchoring the work in the visual center. At the extreme left, bottom and right are reassuring presences of the thematic off-whites to which we have grown accustomed in these works.



Choreographers are judged not just by the dance steps they make but also how well they use space: are dancers on the floor, on their knees, are they elevated? Are they grouped and distributed around the stage in surprising uses of depth? In these paintings, Schulz's mastery of innovative form in painting is epitomized by her encyclopedic repertoire of brush and other techniques. The latter show up from time to time, when she creates substantial mounds and craters of oil paint—usually with black washes that both dramatize and soften the effect. As in *Faux Simile*, the sanded surfaces and these organic, colorfully accreted surfaces are balanced, occasions of taking away and giving back. All this provocative activity is framed on the left by a thematic-yellow half-keyhole shape.

Faux Simile is among the newest works, all from 2008, that are usually half again as large as the 2007 pieces. These paintings are narrative events depicting the poignant muscle of meticulously subdued color. Elspeth in particular is a significant milestone in Schulz's long evolution as an artist. Its underlying red and black horizontal strokes (with many, many other colors from grey to maroon) include both lush painterly activity and rigid hard-edge abstraction, all in service to a sure-handed master plan. These give way to



rounded, congealed magma flows in pink, green, gold and white, washed over with an allaying black. Dramatic satellite launches of white lines shoot off to the canvas edge. The entire left border of squared and stepped yellow elements grounds and contextualizes everything. The work is unexpectedly moving, delivered as an aesthetic telegram arriving viscerally, alongside our breath.

This is what happens when Schulz speaks about a "third event" that makes the whole of an artwork greater than the sum of its parts. She is describing a breakthrough beyond mechanics and intention into the rarest of neighborhoods where inspiration and transcendence reside. This is not a matter of spirituality, but rather the result of a lifetime's concentrated attention, work, and focused intelligence. This exhibition's strength and its rewards come from the inherent dignity and gravitas that painting at the most serious and committed level can embody.

Renny Pritikin October 2008

Renny Pritikin is the Director and Curator of the Nelson Gallery at UC Davis. His most recent book of poetry, How We Talk, was published by POD Press in 2007.







Cornelia Schulz has been exhibiting since 1962 with exhibitions that include the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; University Art Museum, Berkeley, California; the Hansen Fuller Gallery, and Patricia Sweetow Gallery in San Francisco. Born in 1936, Cornelia Schulz studied at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, receiving her MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute. In 1973 Cornelia began teaching at the University of California, Davis, where twice she chaired the Art Department. Schulz retired from the University in 2002 and now holds the title of Professor Emeritus, which honors her 29 years as an arts educator. Three years prior to her retirement Schulz adapted and administered the Arts-Bridge Program at UC Davis. The Program was developed with state funds at the University of California, Irvine, to bring comprehensive arts programming in music, dance, theatre, and the visual arts to K-12 grades. ArtsBridge placed qualified UC arts majors in classrooms to teach arts projects in under-served public school districts. Through her efforts, and a staff of one, Schulz implemented various programming which reached over 2500 children in 34 schools.

1 JolieLaide 2007
oil, acrylic, alkyd resin on canvas
17.5 x 18.75 inches (45.15 cm x 48.375 cm)

4 Further Steps 2008
oil, acrylic, alkyd resin on canvas
34.5 x 29 inches (89.01 cm x 74.82 cm)

5 Another Ghost Story 2008
oil, acrylic alkyd resin on canvas
18 x 14 inches (46.44 cm x 36.12 cm)

6 Elspeth (also cover detail) 2008
oil, alkyd resin, acrylic on canvas
27 x 23.5 inches (69.66 cm x 60.63 cm)

7 Reinclined 2008
oil, acrylic, alkyd resin on canvas
16.5 x 21 inches (42.57 cm x 54.18 cm)

8 Reclining el 4 (red) 2007
acrylic, alkyd resin, ink
14 x 19 inches (36.12 cm x 49.02 cm)

8 Reclining el 3 2007
acrylic, alkyd resin, ink
12 x 20.5 inches (30.96 cm x 52.89 cm)

9 Reclining el 1 2007
acrylic, alkyd resin, ink
14 x 19 inches (36.12 cm x 49.02 cm)

9 Reclining el 2 2007
acrylic, alkyd resin, ink
12.5 x 20 inches (32.25 cm x 51.6 cm)

10 Topical Turn 2008
oil, alkyd resin, acrylic on canvas
32 x 30.5 inches (82.56 cm x 78.69 cm)

11 Industrial Revolution 2008
oil, alkyd resin, acrylic
20 x 24 inches (51.6 cm x 61.92 cm)

12 What's Left of H 2008
oil, alkyd resin, acrylic on canvas
25 x 19 inches (64.5 cm x 49.02 cm)

13 Faux Simile 2008
oil, alkyd resin, acrylic on canvas
27 x 28 inches (69.66 cm x 72.24 cm)

14 Bold Over 2007
oil, alkyd resin, acrylic on canvas
27 x 23.5 inches (69.66 cm x 60.63 cm)

15 Crossing the Styx 2008
oil, alkyd resin, acrylic on canvas
24.5 x 23 inches (63.21 cm x 59.34 cm)



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