

# PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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## San Francisco Chronicle

**The Last Gasps Of Abstraction What show reveals wasn't its intention**

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Saturday, September 2, 2000; PAGE B-1

A possible sign of the times: Group shows lately have begun to be more involving than the solo exhibitions so prized by artists themselves.

See for example "Abstraction: From Raucous to Refined" at the Bedford Gallery in Walnut Creek.

The show aims to illustrate "the enduring vitality and power of abstract art at the beginning of the 21st century," in the words of curator Carrie Lederer.

If it did merely what it set out to do, it would have been a much blander show. Fortunately, in the main, it does the opposite, showing us abstract painters anxiously trying to sustain conviction in what they find themselves compelled to do. Can painting be anything but nostalgic in the age of instant imaging?

Fifteen years ago, Frank Stella, who must know as much about abstract painting as anyone, warned that unless abstraction could adequately define an ancestry for itself, it would collapse into a merely academic exercise.

His warning has begun to seem prophetic.

The Bedford Gallery show contains instructive examples of almost every available tactic of life support for abstract painting.

Catherine Courtenaye, for in stance, places filigreed figures from 19th century handwriting manuals on small, abraded fields of color.

Her obsolete source provides decorative complexities that we do not mistake for personal expression. The resulting pictures lack all intensity.

Reed Danziger takes the "decal" aesthetic of Courtenaye's work much further, to no better effect.

Ann Harrold Taylor's single picture is at the opposite extreme: a cry of faith in painting's capacity -- as a use of energy -- to be morally affirmative, even if it is semantically empty.

Taylor's whirlwind brushwork summons precedents in Abstract Expressionism and some of its forbears, such as Soutine and Van Gogh. But a fear of helplessness underlies her dynamism, helplessness to alter the fate of an art under threat of obsolescence.

Christopher Brown, who long kept real artistic problems at bay with his facility, finds one kind of quandary that still has life in it. His "Red Web" (1999), an etching effaced with pastel, draws us into his uncertainty about whether he has made or destroyed something.

Kara Maria positions her work post-Pop Art by packing comic-strip explosions and speed lines into otherwise elegant color patterns. Her titles, such as "Pink/Green" (1998), sound as though they belong on color field paintings.

**Kim Anno** gives iconic presence to a few bands of color, working with metal leaf on wood. Her "Yonder" (2000), in oil and silver leaf on paper, achieves an improbable effect of burning cold.

ABSTRACTION: FROM RAUCOUS TO REFINED: Works by 14 abstract painters. Through Oct. 1. Bedford Gallery, Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek. Closed Mondays and Sept. 8. (925) 295-1417. ..

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