

The last in Brooklyn II, 1992, m./m., 42 cm.

COY, CLEVER, AND INTIMATE:
VICTORIA CIVERA'S ABSTRACT
 GAMES OF SOLITAIRE ON THE LEVELLED
 PLAYING FIELD OF POSTMODERN ART

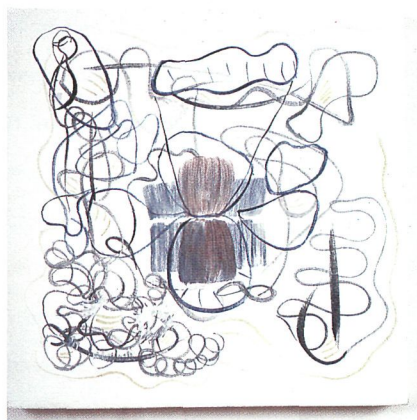
BY DONALD KUSPIT

Victoria Civera's abstract paintings have a certain air of sly, shy irony. Again and again one sees variations on the same idea: a small geometrical format -circle, ellipse, rectangle, but mostly Malevichian square- with its center marked, often by an esoterically shaped element when not a populist polka dot. *Helen, Mickey Mouse, Humo y Zinc O and I*, *Noviembre*, all 1987, are early examples. Or else a pattern, asymmetrical when not skewed or truncated, and generally painted with stylized awkwardness, covers the surface. *Bodegon II* and *Lazada*, both 1991, and *Gato Sobre La Mesa* and *Sueño Perdido en una Digestión*, both 1992, are examples. Her works seem subliminally satiric, or at least ironically mischievous. She treats the elements of

abstraction casually, toying with them, if with a nonchalance that seems studied. At the same time, her paintings look secretive, as though trying to hide their real, disturbing meaning from us. On the surface, they look like postmodernist texts, that is, hybrids of contradictory codes. But their codes do not come together in a seamless way. There is an irksome friction to her works. Her center seems to disturb the harmony of the space it is in, however much it marks the space as a rational order. Her pattern seems inherently absurd, for all the regularities in it. Civera's abstract center has been interpreted as an eccentric version of the female symbol. But it is not as "outspoken" as the central, so-called vaginal imagery such avowed feminists

as Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro made in the early seventies. Civera generates a sense of intrigue, while they made propaganda for a cause. They were political, while Civera is personal, however obscurely. If her works are subliminally feminist, they suggest a retreat from the political to the purely personal, suggesting that to regard the personal as always political is in fact to miss its point. It is no longer an alternative space to the world, but another anonymous room in it. But a feminist reading of Civera's paintings misses their paradoxical character: their peculiar mix of normative structure and absurd details. It is this that made them coyly ambiguous, even mysterious. They seem to promise profound meaning, but they do not quite deliver it. They seem innocent inventions, but with an air of *déjà vu*. They seem too capricious to have been made with much conviction, but their wit is convincing in itself. Civera makes lonely little pictures out of the stylistic cards of modern abstraction. She plays a postmodernist game of solitaire with them, seeking her emotional fortune in the pictorial hands she deals herself. In the best postmodern art, such as Civera's, modernist styles have become Tarot cards. This not only signals how predictable they have become, but makes clear the existential import they implicitly have. This import can now declare itself openly -if in the ironic form of a stereotype, that is, a playing card- because social resistance

to them, which acknowledged their social rebellion but not their psychological achievement, has faded. In a sense, the quirky way Civera handles geometrical form restores it to psychological significance. It can still be used to convey nonobjective feeling, as Malevich called it. But such feeling is inherently more elusive and insidious for Civera than it ever was for Malevich. Her abstractions in fact have a more occult feel, for all their irony, than Malevich's icons, which seem declarative in comparison. The sober, serious paintings of Malevich make Civera's whimsy, indeed, tipsiness, transparent. The difference between them is the difference between a modern tragic sensibility and a postmodern comic sensibility between heroic modern breakthrough to the unknown and postmodern playfulness with the known. But both achieve an effect of uncanniness through incongruity, except that it has a different meaning in modernity and postmodernity. What meaning does the insignia "Force Recon" acquire by reason of its placement in the center of the red field of *Salvation Army 2*, 1989? How does it change the meaning of the traditional monochrome field? What meaning does its title give it? There is an air of inventive playfulness about the picture, but also of pointless playfulness. The absurdity invented is simultaneously a Delphic riddle and a comic tease. The picture toys with our expectations, without satisfying them. *Luck*, 1992 -



Victoria Civera. *Remind*, 1992. M./m., 46 x 46 cm.
Courtesy Soledad Lorenzo, Madrid.

one side of a die, "cockeyed" by reason of its off-center dot- makes Civera's point transparently: there is always something ingeniously off or absurd about her compositions, which makes them seem meaningless and profoundly meaningful at once. But it is not clear that there is any meaning to their "offness". They simply present it as the only means of making a viable art, an art that engages us as well as seems, however uncertainly, worthwhile in itself. The "off" stripes and almost neat center gesture of *Saro*, 1991; the sequence of white dots and broad stripes (Spanish tan and black) in *Dos de La Tarde*, 1991, creating ironically multiple centers; the crooked web with the overlay of black bands cancelling its center in *Simiente*, 1991 -there are many more examples- seem to say: to be "off" -to create an effect of absurdity- is the only salvation for abstraction, even though absurdity no longer has deep meaning. Civera's works, with their "empty" absurdity, with their constant

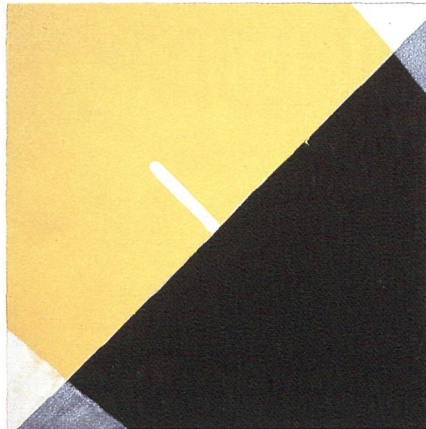
reinvention of absurdity for itself, bespeak the absurdity of postmodernism itself. The only valid way of making art in postmodernism is to suggest the absurdity of making art, that is, to acknowledge that art is always problematic -that it can no longer exist outside of quotation marks- which is why to make it is absurd. Civera's absurdity is emblematic of the postmodern sense that it is no longer possible to be modern, that is, to make an art that is existentially meaningful in its very texture and form -that signals the forces of life and death in all their subjective fundamentality in its absurd concreteness. Invented absurdity, announcement of their presence. Postmodernism is an acknowledgement that modernism has become decadent. Indeed, postmodernism sometimes seems like a deliberate effort to deny that modernism ever had any heroic meaning. In the case of abstraction, this means the demonstration that it is a jaded game rather than the expression of the will to transcendence. (In modernism it embodied the conflict between life and death that was to be transcended as well as the sense of transcendence.) The abstract game may be played in a variety of willy ways, but it will never show one's inner existence to one in an artistic light as unexpected as what is seen in it. Civera's absurdity tempts us with the idea that the abstract game may have its introspective uses, but the self it implies seems out of touch with both life and death. The only thing that

saves it from itself is that it can play itself very well.

Postmodernism not only involves the recognition that nothing fundamentally new -"modern"- is possible in art, but that art is no longer very meaningful humanly.

Absurdification of old art -which is what is behind appropriation art at its best, as in Civera -is the only thing that can make art seem meaningful, and perhaps strike a spark of human meaning.

Numerous strategies are used to produce absurdity, but it does not seem entirely authentic artistically and humanly, the way modern absurdity did. The postmodern pursuit of absurdity -of "offhandedness" and high jinks, of humor and mischief- both masks and expresses art's self-doubt after modernism. Postmodern artists unconsciously suffer from the agony of knowing that they are the epigone of modern artists. Indeed, modern art was the last chance for art in a society which is increasingly indifferent to its enchantment. Society is determined to be completely realistic, that is, scientifically enlightened about and *technologically in control of nature, both human and non-human*. Art has become "make work" in such a society, which expects nothing from it but diversion and amusement, affording relief from the seriousness of reality. Thus, there is no inherent reason to make art anymore, nor to believe in it with any strong conviction. This is what postmodernist artists unconsciously recognize and



Victoria Civera, *Leave the room*, 1993. M./m., 46 x 46 cm. Courtesy Soledad Lorenzo, Madrid.

express. They do not have deep faith in what they make, which is why it seems "funny". They play games in the reins of modern art. In their own minds, they may win these games, but this does not give them any deeper understanding of art or life.

Postmodern artists cannot make heroic art, but they can tweak the nose of heroic modern art. That is, it can be treated comically, which eliminates the tragedy implicit in it, or rather the sense of tragic conflict it both acknowledged and tried to transcend. Postmodern comic desublimation of modern art, while no doubt initially liberating, tends to be nihilistic, in that it treats art as a kind of entertaining sport or game. In general, the modern artist attempted to *forge a new sense of self in revolutionary* response to a society he or she felt alienated from, by reason of its tendency to reduce the self to its passive instrument. The modern artist had the good sense to realize that this was a kind of servitude if not suicide. In contrast, art, for the postmodern artist, is not a

way of achieving a new sense of self, but rather, however unwittingly, a way of identifying with it, which in effect acknowledges defeat by it. In

postmodernism art becomes a "dirty game", like society. That is, art becomes as cynical -as much of a sick, absurd comedy- as society.

Civera's postmodernist abstraction -shows the same cynical absurdity and sick comedy as society, but also signs of *modern revolt and with it the modern* ambition to create a new autonomy for the self. Her "offness" is not only the basic postmodernist method, but almost convincingly modern. That is, it seems authentically rather than inauthentically uncanny. Authentic -modern- uncanniness signals the possibility of a genuinely new self. In other words, there is, however obliquely, a "surreal" aspect to Civera's abstraction. It is in effect caught on the horns of a dilemma: she seems both to push uncanny incongruity to a cynical, postmodern extreme, making it a sick joke that bespeaks the sick joke society is by reason of its absurd contradictions, and to use it as a divining rod to seek out fresh sources of *selfhood, which is the modern way of . . . using uncanny incongruity*. Civera implies that incongruity can still be put to existential use, which keeps in check her tendency to make a postmodernist game of it, that is, to make it a cynical manipulation of contradiction. Civera's abstraction seems full of intrigue because it is trapped in a tension it does not know how to escape.