



"OCEAN PAINTING NO. 6," 2010

**Willy Heeks**

ACRYLIC AND OIL ON CANVAS

74" x 77"

PHOTO: COURTESY SCOTT WHITE CONTEMPORARY ART

## SAN DIEGO

### **Willy Heeks: "Ocean House Paintings" at Scott White Contemporary Art**

While as recently as 2008 the work of American abstract painter Willy Heeks was

far more earth-bound, done on opaque wood panels featuring the occasional arboreal silhouette, the canvases from his latest solo show (all from 2010) have decidedly set sail. The title of the exhibition—"Ocean House Paintings"—suggests the sea in no uncertain terms and the influence shows, situating these paintings neatly in the brine.

In a single painting, like *Ocean Painting No. 6* or *Poet*, Heeks can float in calm waters via large light planes of liquid stains before conjuring a tempest through layers of gesture, form, and furiously applied paint. Contours of varying thickness wend their way through the picture plane, working to stabilize, if only momentarily, the otherwise prevailing oceanic chaos. These lines also have, at times, the uncanny effect of dragging the entire scene underwater with their suggestions of coral formations or vague hints of sea creatures. Perspectives vary; at different intervals the viewer may wonder if he or she is set in the sky looking down at the water or on a cliff looking out across it while at other moments the frame seems to be altogether underneath the surface in assorted orientations. The result is a kind of visual vertigo that gets reinforced by an unhinged network of movement and bearing. All of this is facilitated through an unpretentiously bright color scheme, with highbrow earth tones being washed away by a luminescent spectrum of violets, yellows, and ultramarine.

On the one hand, as a certifiable East Coaster (he was born and bred in Rhode Island in the early fifties, where he continues to work today), some might hail Heeks as a current torchbearer of what was the mid-twentieth century glory of New York abstract painting. (Insert here citations of 'expressive brushwork' and 'drips'.) On the other hand, current viewers might just as easily grumble about these same qualities, feeling that those same issues have now long since lost their urgency. However, it is safe to say that through his own aesthetic phrasing Heeks creates a rather compelling visual sweep, one that retains its relevancy today even as it flirts with yesterday's modes.

—DREW SNYDER

# Artweek

OCTOBER 2008  
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## Reviews

### Willy Heeks at Brian Gross Fine Art

Nearly half a century ago the great philosopher of art Richard Wollheim remarked that one of the peculiarities of the recent practice of visual art is that the margin has become the center. By "the margin" he meant those artists who, wishing for whatever reason to break with established practices, renounce the achievements of the past, particularly the recent past, and seek new techniques, media and subjects for their art. The margin has indeed become the center in that its ideology is widely viewed as a characteristic mark of the most sophisticated and accomplished art. The malign effects of this ideology have been much canvased in recent years in terms of the relative exclusion of artists outside

the mainstream of the New York art world after World War II. Some attention, too, has been given to the relative neglect of the greatest works of artists, such as Max Beckmann or the later Georges Braque, who were sometimes willingly pushed away from this odd center. More difficult, perhaps because surrounded by more taboos of taste, is the appreciation of the works of recent artists who insist on drawing from the achievements and expressive potentials of recent art; the word "derivative" is the most potent curse. Willy Heeks's exhibition of six paintings at Brian Gross Fine Art this summer offered some perspective on this taboo.

Heeks has been showing his work continually for more than twenty years, and a large body of criticism almost invariably refers to his work as "abstract expressionist." But here the term is even more than usually inaccurate. At a glance, but only at a glance, the works appear to be descendants, many generations removed, of something like a mental image of a remembered 1950s abstraction: They're passages of self-proclaiming gestures in shapes like fishhooks and tendrils, which cluster roughly in the middle, though always off-center, of the canvas, and which are set against shallow but atmospheric backgrounds. Color is varied, but is used primarily to give legibility to micro-areas of distinct handling. A flat white is the major red thread running through this set. In the roughly centered and foregrounded elements there are, besides the gestural tracery, two other kinds of paint handling. The major technique is a kind of pooling with the brush, where opaque deposits are allowed to overlap to the point where the sense of the temporal order of their making recedes, and the sense of the a bounded shape seems not to emerge but rather about to gestate, like an amorphous fertilized egg before self-division. Heeks's other handling of paint, shown in all but one work, is a use of mostly white stenciling of a great rectangle of conifers. In the largest and most landscape-like canvas, *Balcony in Verdun*, Heeks has added four drooping black clouds of stenciled black cornucopia in a Celtic-like stylization. At more than a glance, then, Heeks's works reveal themselves to be determinedly syncretic: The squat uprightness of the paintings suggest portraits; the treatment of the background and its determined non-relation to the foreground echoes amateur landscape; the juxtaposition of distinct ways of paint handling metaphorizes the act of painting as fundamentally a collage of short-winded

thoughts, unfolding improvisationally.

It's a miracle that it's not a mess; only *Daylight* seems over-worked, with its surface rather too densely covered with a web of cells and spores reminiscent of the signature style of Terry Winters. Each work implies the hard labor of discontinuous tasks, suspended by a refined "Enough!"—like a denim sleeve in cufflinks. One thought suggested by Heeks's work is that the very idea of the art world—that the art world has a center and a margin, inverted or not, itself underwritten by the idea that it makes sense to think of the art world as one great thing—is itself something whose reign is over. Perhaps the concept of the art world should be relativized to different audiences in boardrooms and bedrooms, pavilions and grottoes. Heeks has the signal virtue of inhabiting a niche that remains close to what perennially draws people to painting: some work, some history, some complexity, some pleasure.

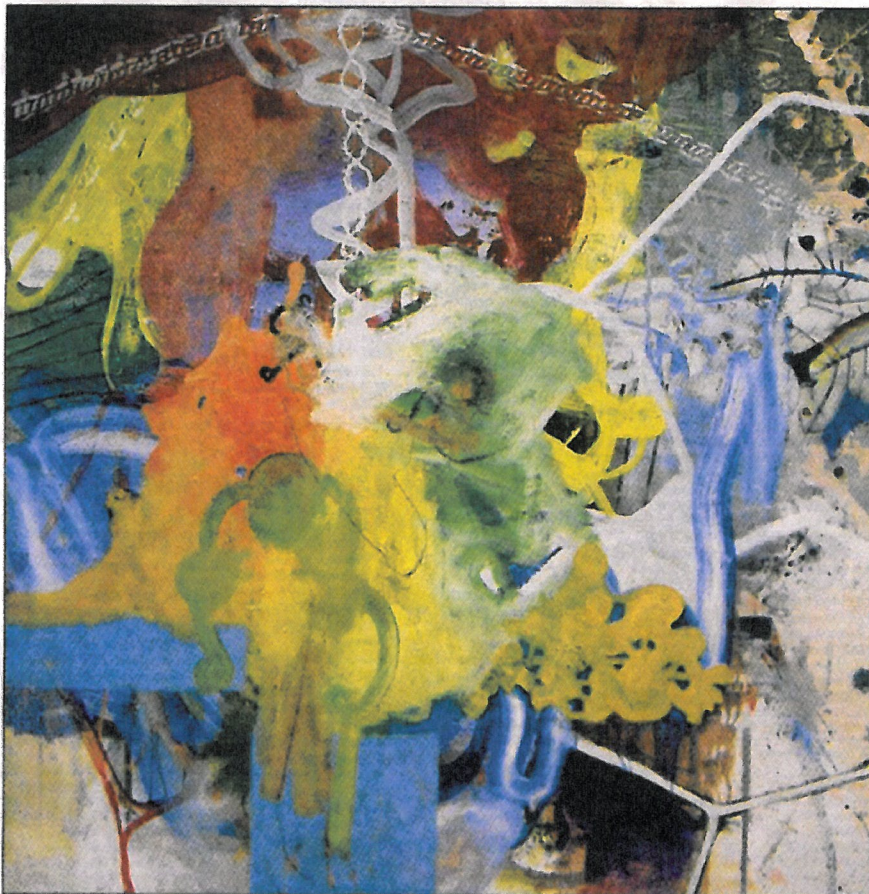
—John Rapko

Willy Heeks: *Recent Work* closed in August at Brian Gross Fine Art, San Francisco.



Willy Heeks, (left) *Daylight* 2008, oil and acrylic on canvas, 96" x 94"; (right) *Post* 2008, oil and acrylic on canvas, 46-1/2" x 44-1/4", at Brian Gross Fine Art, San Francisco.





Brian Gross Fine Art

In "Eccentric Location," above left, Willy Heeks changed tools and techniques often.

Rhode Island painter Willy Heeks, whose recent work hangs at Brian Gross Fine Art, practices what we might call post-Richter abstraction.

In 2002, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art presented a retrospective of German painter Gerhard Richter's work that included a number of the large, imageless canvases he produces by troweling on curtains of paint layer over layer. These Richter paintings strike a Beckett-like tone of equal resignation to the pointlessness of an activity and to the impossibility of quitting it. Whatever aesthetic glories arise from Richter's process, as in Beckett's language, seem more like precipitates of the medium itself than of artistry.

The peculiar tenor and powerful presence of Richter's abstractions make them mileposts for somewhat younger painters such as Heeks, burdened with consciousness of their historical position in the art.

Heeks' paintings simply look a mess at first. But a painting such as "Eccentric Location" (2008) records a struggle to keep it alive to his eye, and ours, despite the allusive echoes that every move touches off, despite the temptation to resolve the very dissonances he seeks.

The success of "Eccentric Location" and

### Kenneth Baker Galleries

several other pictures here shows in the way they look like the result of several painters collaborating reluctantly.

In making "Eccentric Location" Heeks changed tools and techniques frequently, here letting materials themselves shape visual information, there containing it with drawing or even fragments of stencil. A viewer infers that Heeks rotated the canvas, possibly often, while working on it. The composition's stop-and-start quality attests to its improvised character and evokes a sense of frequently wavering conviction on the painter's part.

The result, though, is a painting that will not play dead or accept its culturally predestined fate as decor. Like Richter, Heeks seems continually to be fending off nostalgia, irony and grief — emotional postures of defeat in the face of his art's dwindling into pastiche, commerce and lifestyle.

# DATEBOOK



## The keeper of space

An interview with Willy Heeks

James Jack

Vanguard Staff

I first met Willy Heeks in Vermont at an 1850s Episcopal Church that had been converted into artists' studios, and his enthusiasm surely blew away any sermon delivered there. We ended up partying late into the night with other artists—enjoying passionate conversations about art, life and everything in between. After our laid-back introduction, it was surprising to realize what a renowned artist he is. Since participating in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program in 1973, he has amassed honors and recognition from coast to coast. His paintings are in many museum collections, including the MoMA in New York and San Francisco, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and our own Portland Art Museum. Heeks has received prestigious awards from Louis Comfort Tiffany, the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Pollock-Krasner Foundation. I spoke with Heeks the week his show opened in Portland at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery about art, life and surfing:

**Why did you choose the title *Echoes* for this show?**

To be truthful, I didn't originally have a title. They are just paintings. I wasn't thinking about the presentation aspect. I was going to title it *Echoes of Light*, but I settled on *Echoes* because it has a sense of space, and space repeating itself. The keeper of space creates a rhythm. Within the realm of an exhibit, I thought of the paintings together, on the gallery walls bounding off each other.

**You go through a dense layering process while painting, creating an ethereal air floating with light and darkness. How does it all come about in the studio?**

I work in an improvisational style, building the picture as I go. The layering, then allowing the piece to go where you want it to go. I think a lot about the density of the space, and how to open it up. The layers are highly unintentional in the process. I keep some of the shallow layers to retain an early identity of the work while the thicker areas naturally become the foreground.

**Have you ever had your work compared to graffiti? How do you feel about that?**

Not Graffiti with a capital G, but the drawn line or graffiti-like mark relates to my work. I do use spray cans. It becomes a painted image—in other words, not brush, not hand, not palette knife, not squeeze-on. In the midst of it, there is a playful element that is absent from classical paintings.

**What kind of music do you listen to in the studio?**

*Time Out of Mind*, the Bob Dylan album. Bill Frisell is in my player. Nothing formulaic. I like Vic Chestnutt and Neil Young a lot.

**What would you say to people who are in art school now wondering what**

**the hell they are doing with their life? I mean, what were you doing in your twenties?**

It's funny you should mention that, because earlier today I was in a music shop and we were talking to this girl who sits there behind the counter. She hates all school. She didn't want to let go of her drawings. She just didn't want to give them up. When people are just out of school, I don't want to sound like I'm on a soapbox or something. Stay flexible and open—don't let anyone close your world in. Be self-disciplined. I have a work ethic extending as far back as my childhood. If people stop getting so tense about wanting to be part of something and having early success, quit worrying if they are going to make it, you know, get a gallery. Look at it with a blue-collar perspective. A lot of people end up going to grad school only to be among more of the same type of atmosphere, what some consider a "supportive" environment. As an artist in the "real world" you have to be more resilient in how you run your life. If you have to have a job, be sure you divide your time up and dedicate some to your work. Make sure you do it. Don't worry about enormous success.

**What was the best art party of 2006?**

Oh shit! I don't go to any art parties. If you said one, I'd be like, oh yeah, that's the one I missed.

**I know you were born in Providence, but where are you based now?**

About 20 minutes outside Providence, R.I., close to the ocean. I do a lot of surfing. I've been a surfer since I was a young kid. Being close to the ocean is really helpful to me.

**Do you think surfing has an influence on your paintings?**

Yeah, definitely. Tossing in the water all the time, it's a spiritual hot spot. It's kind of like my sport, but I don't treat it like a sport. It's like the thing I want to try and get in some waves out there on the Oregon coast sometime.

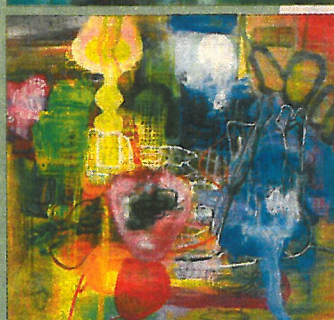
**Being from the East, I can say the waves are definitely bigger out here on the West Coast. And you know**

**it doesn't matter how cold and rainy it is—people just keep on going back into the curl!**

I do, too, year-round! I like the tides of surfing, and they enter into the work. I have done a lot of paintings inspired by the ocean. I've also done quite a few nautical pieces.

**What were the sickest waves you've ever ridden?**

Since I am not a big traveling surfer, the sickest waves were here in Rhode Island at a spot they call K99 in Point Judith—during Hurricane Isabel. Fifteen-foot waves! Fast, barreling lefts. I was going backside. They were filled with seaweed torn up from the ocean. Their color was an amazing blend of greens and browns. The sun was out and it was toasty warm. That's what I call inspiration!



Ethereal air: Willy Heeks explores his distinctive style in *Echoes*.



# DATEBOOK

SATURDAY, MARCH 11, 2000

## Abstractions at Their Own Pace

**H**andsome messes are what East Coast painter Willy Heeks makes. A show of some of his recent works in oil and ink on paper are at Gross.

The roots of Heeks' style are in abstract expressionism in that he plainly improvises and lets his materials have their way to some extent. But his abstractions are expressively cool, even where their colors blaze.

Their details show changes of speed and technique that belie any presumption of urgency. The internal rhythms of these works on paper are more like those of collage than of straight-ahead painting.

In "Farm Drawing No. 5" (2000), for instance, Heeks has drawn lines — clearly an afterthought — linking accidental splatters of color from an earlier stage of his work on the piece. The resulting figures bring to



Willy Heeks' oil and ink on water work, "Nautical Element Series 2," expresses a theme of conflict.

mind the filigree of voodoo emblems but lack their coherence.

Stencilled elements — a leafy twig, a length of rope, a swatch of net — undergird pooled or drizzled color.

The theme of pictures such as "Nautical Element Series 2" and "Pond" (2000) is the conflict between calculation and intuition or

intention and circumstances.

Two centuries ago, figural allegory seemed the only possible idiom in which such themes could find pictorial expression. In our era, improvisations like Heeks' do.

**KENNETH  
BAKER**

*Art*



# ARTnews

December 1999

## NEW YORK REVIEWS

### Willy Heeks

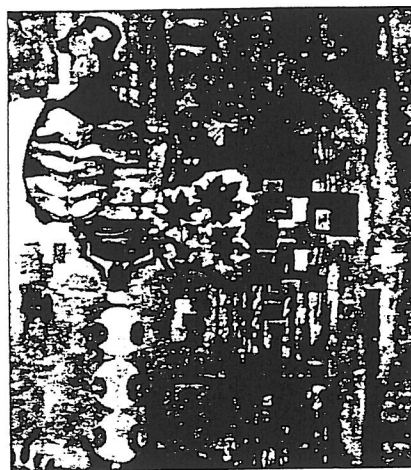
DAVID BEITZEL

If there is such a thing as a school of Layered Abstract Painting (and judging from a number of younger painters, it seems there is), Willy Heeks must be at the head of the class. The formula seems to work like this: start with a Frankenthaler-esque field of sensuous color, and then mix in elements of graffiti, pattern painting, gestural abstraction, and biomorphism. The trick is to pull it all back from the brink of chaos, and this Heeks manages very well.

His recent paintings all carry teasingly allusive titles—*Dreamer*, *Lantern Study*, *Poet*, *Tidal Column*—that don't seem to find correspondences in the imagery, but no matter. In *Translation*, a great yellow orb in the upper right is balanced by a splash of white at the left, with a dense and intricate insectlike shape in the middle and the whole leavened by patches of sage green, peach, and baby blue. A leafy pattern and four chainlike skeins anchor *The Balcony*'s free-floating circles, while a headlike shape and double column of mottled white do the same for *Bell (to Dylan)*. This last work contains a suggestion of the grids that overlay Heeks's previous paintings, but for the most part the artist is content to let his own sense of improvisation carry the day.

The only problem is a certain sameness of mood and imagery. Heeks is a little too much the musician playing variations on one composition over and over. Nevertheless, it's still a rich and satisfying one.

—Ann Landi



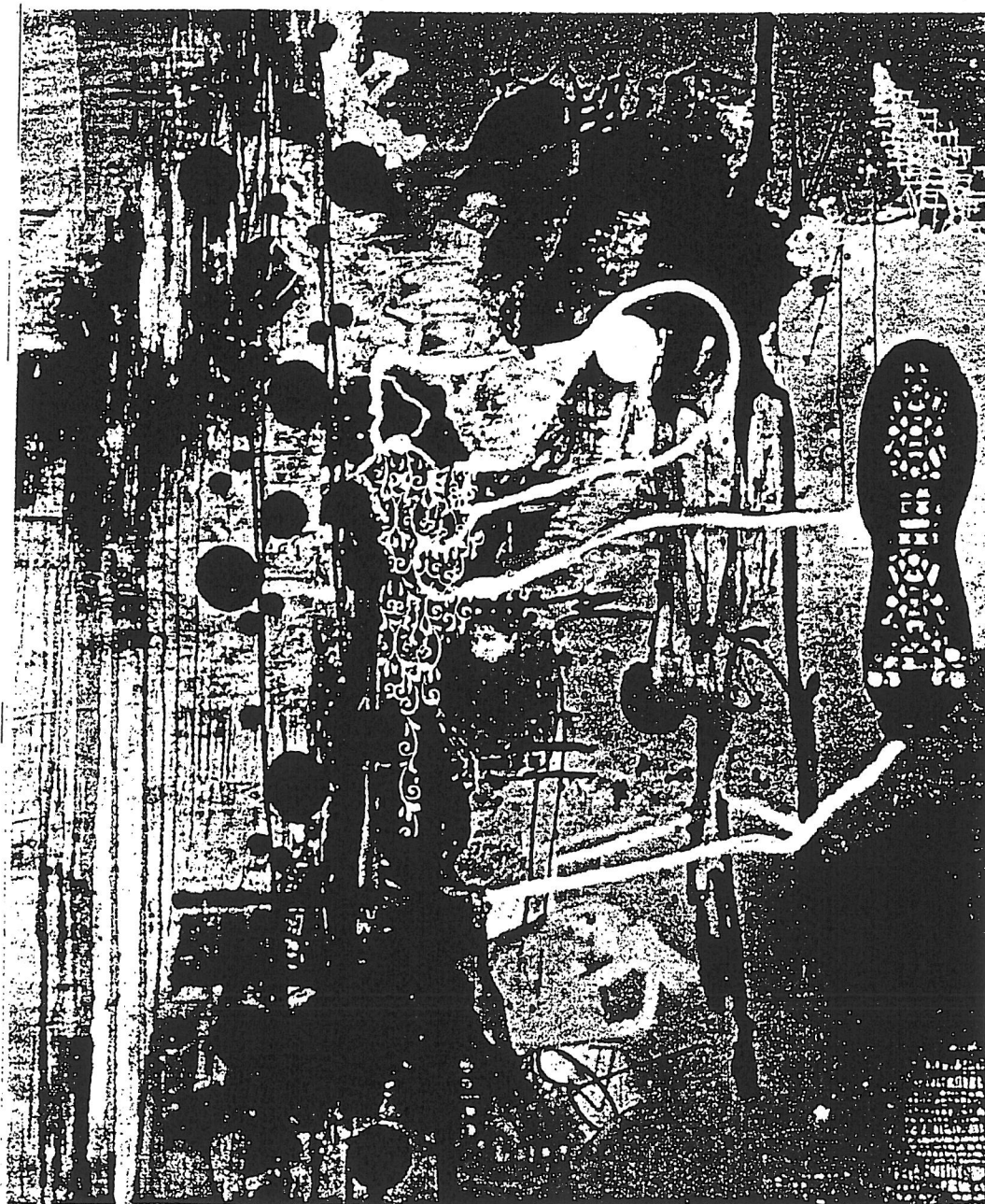
Willy Heeks, *The Eighth Sculpture*, 1999, oil on canvas, 60" x 54".  
David Beitzel.



# NEW YORK

SEPTEMBER 20, 1999

**Talent** Willy Heeks's new abstract paintings continue to evoke the natural world—or, more specifically, a landscape lit from within—not unlike Charles Burchfield's shimmering visions of trees and skies. Heeks also hints at a human presence through his incorporation of images based on such man-made decorative forms as stencils and wrought-iron gates. At David Beitzel Gallery, 102 Prince Street; through October 9.





# The San Diego Union-Tribune

VISUAL



ARTS

Thursday

May 20, 1993

## Heeks will drive you to abstraction

*SOMA exhibit shows off his flexibility*

By ROBERT L. PINCUS  
Art Critic

**A**t first, Willy Heeks' paintings seem quaint. They pay affectionate homage to abstractions of the '30s and '40s, when painters like Matta, Jackson Pollock and Arshile Gorky filled canvases with forms that hinted at sources in this world without picturing anything specific. Looking longer, Heeks' art doesn't seem like an exercise in nostalgia at all.

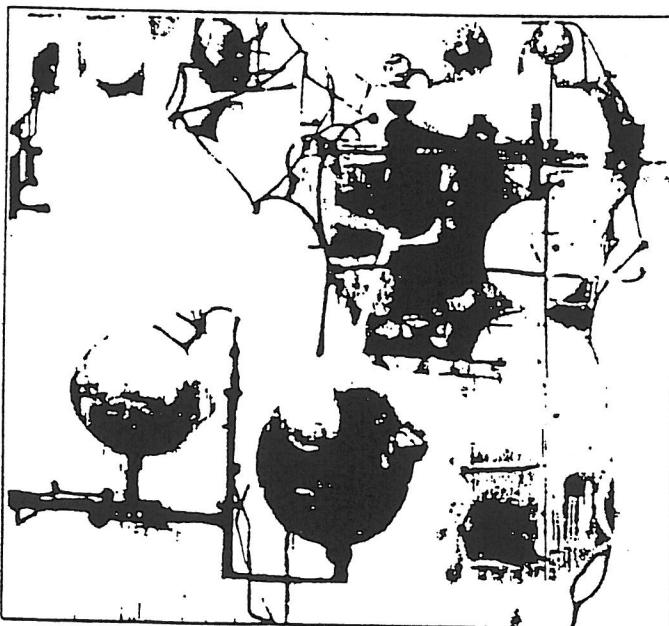
His exhibition at the SOMA Gallery in downtown San Diego, "Recent Paintings and Works on Paper," contains ample evidence that he has something to add to that modernist tradition. His work attests that the approach to abstraction which surrealists and abstract expressionists invented is still a living one, given an imaginative enough painter.

The 42-year-old painter, a native of Providence, R.I., who resides in New York, is just such a painter. He's had several solo shows in Manhattan and elsewhere on the East Coast. But this is his first in California, and the gallery has done local viewers a good turn by providing him with a solo show.

Heeks has one of those flexible styles that lets him work in large or small formats with equal effectiveness. He favors rounded forms — some perfect circles and others more ambiguous shapes — linked by intricate networks of lines that divide a picture gracefully. His palette emphasizes muted colors, but interspersed with the brooding browns and blacks are seductive yellows and blues.

Some of Heeks' forms seem to lie flat against the picture plane. Others have depth, seemingly receding into the painting as if there were a world inside them, a kind of abstract wonderland or sky filled with astral bodies.

It's easiest to get lost in the big paintings, since there seems to be so much room for the eye and mind of the viewer. "Gate" (1993) is a rich example, with spheres floating prominently



Willy Heeks' convincing abstractions, such as "Gate" (left), subtly allude to natural and architectural forms.

### ART REVIEW

"Recent Paintings and Works on Paper," a solo exhibition by Willy Heeks

SOMA Gallery, 343 Fourth Ave., downtown.  
Through May 30. Free; 232-3955.

in the foreground, linked by thin strands of black that loosely resemble reeds or pipes. Effects turn thicker as a viewer lets his eyes journey farther into the distance; circles, fragments of circles and ellipses overlap, with a tapestrylike intricacy.

Heeks' titles are suggestive more than descriptive. "Gate" is used metaphorically; the painting provides a passageway for the viewer's imagination to travel to the sort of fantastical place that strong abstract images offer. This title hints at an architectural source for the paint-

ing, transformed in the process of its creation into a rich abstraction.

"Hybrid" (1991) possesses a resonant title, too. Its name suggests the double nature of Heeks' approach: the painting is abstract without ever abandoning bonds with the world of everyday objects. The picture contains vestiges of wheels and vessels resembling vats or buckets, but nothing can be definitively labeled.

On paper, Heeks' vocabulary of spherical shapes and sensuous mapping of lines takes on the look of a private sort of calligraphy. The compositions are inventive, more often than not. When they are not, they decline into an easier sort of elegance that seems to dog nearly all painters of the abstract expressionist variety.

If this show is any indication, Heeks isn't likely to let any sort of formula overtake his paintings. They are rigorously conceived and marvelously rendered.

GALLERY

## Optical Allusions

By George Melrod



Willy Heeks's abstract paintings are so vivid and multi-layered that it is almost a surprise to discover how well they fit together. But that is Heeks's trademark: unleashing brilliant medleys of line and color, then pulling back from the edge of chaos to create compositions of beguiling beauty. His works have been called bio-organic—and his bulbous strands and webs do recall bodily systems, microscopic vegetation, or floor plans from an intricate cellular architecture. But his compositions are clearly designed for the page, and their jazzy syn-copation lends them a lively graphic pop. With their lush aqueous color fields and interlacing patterns, his works are music to the optic nerves. Heeks's works on paper—such as *Fallen Branch*, above—will be paired with those of another subtle abstractionist, Sabina Ott, at Mark Moore in Santa Monica, California, through June 14.



# ARTnews

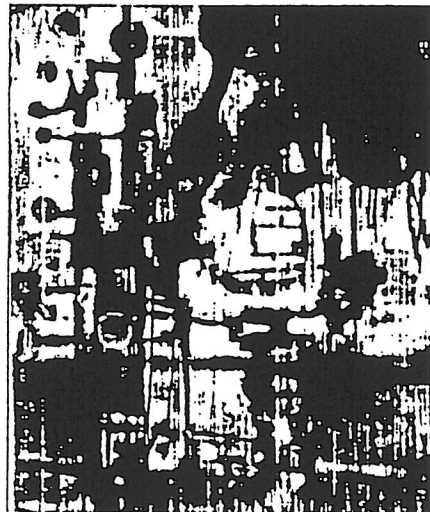
## Willy Heeks February 1995

DAVID BEITZEL

**A**mong the artists who make layered, abstract paintings, Willie Heeks is one of the best. His application of paint, whether cavalierly dripped or carefully brushed, imbues his works with a quiet beauty. At the same time, the allusion to depth created by layering shapes and the final overlay of a black, abstract grid both contradicts the romanticism of the surface and energizes the work. Heeks has turned painting inside out, using the grid not in the traditional sense as a skeleton on which to hang the composition but as a skein that contains it.

His source of inspiration seems to be his surroundings, reconfigured and relocated to the terrain of the mind. In *Cove*, a palette of blue, black, and earth tones creates a horizon line that suggests the seashore. At the same time, the layer of shapes and colors, overlaid by this dark gridded structure, captures the unseen, abstract energy of the ocean. *Branch* has a similar juxtaposition and stratification of shapes and colors, although the locale is less specific. Here, the black overlay could be a web of trees, the grid of the city, or even the notes on a music score, another suggestion of invisible energy. This tension between the layers and shapes combined with an oblique reference to the representational world keeps the paintings from dissolving into arbitrary abstraction.

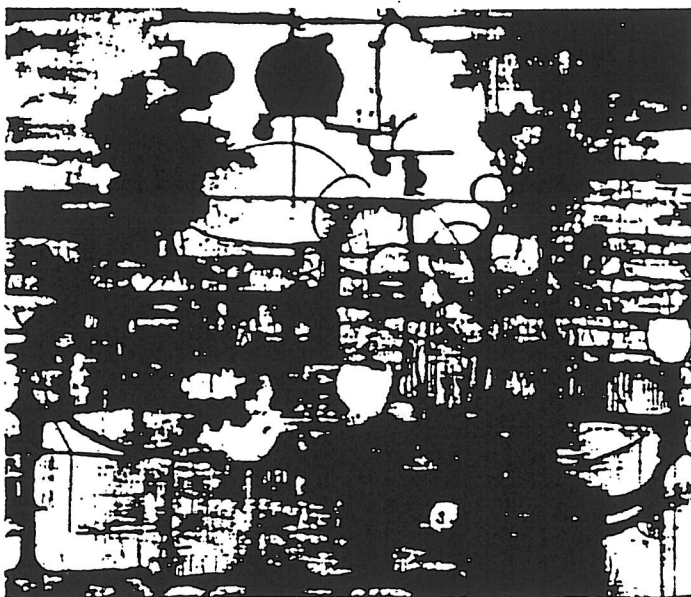
SUE SCOTT



Willie Heeks,  
*Cove*, 1994,  
oil on canvas,  
48" x 38".  
David Beitzel.

# ARTFORUM

MARCH 1991



Willy Heeks, *Solace*, 1990, oil on canvas, 90 x 106".

## WILLY HEEKS

Willy Heeks continues to display a laudable, even thrilling ambition in his paintings, with each successive show pushing into fresh abstract territory. His snarls of thickly applied paint from a couple of years ago, with their science-fiction overtones suggesting dangerously pulsating molecules, seemed to burst off the canvas, like a chain reaction run amok. Now Heeks has dispersed this same energy over the surfaces of his paintings, moving from a distinctly figurative style to a more all-over mode. The new images suggest networks, traffic grids, electronic circuit boards, on the one hand, or decorative fretwork—Indian, say, or Arabian—on the other. This is augmented by Heeks' use of dripping paint, which seems to have enjoyed a general resurgence of popularity of late, as a tactic to harness chance effects in the service of a specific kind of painterly beauty.

This new work promises more than it delivers, though. Heeks lays brilliant ground-

work for a final ante-upping twist of his painterly terms, but never quite comes through. The eye wanders over tangled webs of paint and moves back and forth into the space of the painting, waiting for the decisive incident—the *punctum* that will catch the eye—but too often it never comes. In *The Prophet* (all works 1990), for example, dark openwork on a noxious greenish yellow background establishes a mood of ominous oppression; from the center of this confining structure bursts a bouquet of light—golden and white curlicues—that almost, but never quite, break free of the background. The drama here—the triumph of light over dark, or of pure color over muddled color—is perhaps too obvious, and his central figures remain collections of lines that are pointedly delightful, allowing a viewer to admire them comfortably, with no sense of threat or further challenge.

Maybe these pictures are just too well made; they reflect the work of too knowing a hand. Heeks seems to be aiming to combine the kind of all-over hum of a Jackson Pollock, say, with Willem de Kooning's central iconic image, but often there is no real event here, nothing to disrupt the smooth digestion of the luscious painting. These are amazingly beautiful paintings, dizzying in their visual and material effects, but they want to be better—the want to mean. This ambition is a central and undeniable strength; that they don't (yet) fully live up to it is only a promise of better things to come.

—Charles Hagen