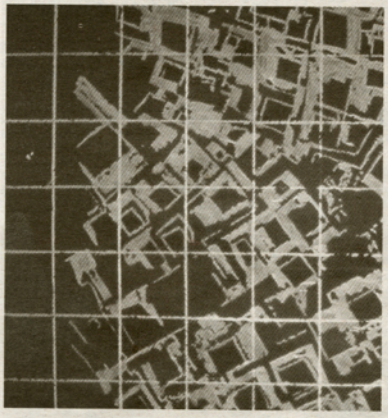
## Survey Says?

# HARTMUT AUSTEN AT P.F. GALLERIES

by Natalie Haddad



Forget briefly that the United States was long ago ascribed a beginning and an end: from one ocean to the next. When Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon began surveying the territory, it was nothing but space. Yet because space on land is guaranteed to die, the Mason-Dixon line does, too. In 1997, though, Thomas Pynchon returned to the line when he published *Mason & Dixon*, this time without the restrictions of land. *Mason & Dixon* surveyed space as art (with substantial poetic license); and with that, Pynchon found a loophole instead of the end of the line.

Space is a potentially infinite thing in the paintings of Hartmut Austen. It masquerades as a suggestion of place, the distinguishing features of which are shrouded in a field of painterly abstraction, presumably for the sake of mystery, or at least equivocation. From a certain perspective, it articulates the esoteric riddle of art — why? why not? — by articulating nothing. But space is never nothing, and there's no esoteric riddle in Austen's work. Instead, there's a procession of symbols with no beginning or end.

Though it's not officially a retrospective, *Paintings from the Studio of Hartmut Austen* — his fifth solo exhibition — at Clawson's P.F. Galleries does a fine job of illustrating the artist's evolution over the past few years, and with it, the territory that *he's* surveyed.

Austen was born in Germany in 1967 and studied art at the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin before relocating to metro Detroit with his wife (a Michigan native) in 1998. It's no surprise, therefore, that the works refuse to adhere to a fixed model. His subjects are predominately people and landscapes. Essentially, these are the subjects that provide the basis for all art; and in that sense, it's the space for interpretation that is infinite.

Consciously or not, Austen's fascination with the canvas as a cartographic tool is clear. What looks like abstraction registers more often like representation (land sans landscape), most obviously in 1997's "Mapping Unknown Worlds." Fifty-five inches high and 78 inches wide, "Mapping" is a labyrinth of roads to nowhere, or rather, the unknown. The only trace of familiarity comes from a few loosely rendered highway signs — 15, 11 and 1,000-mile-long 75. The "map," however, is a consumptive expanse of red-on-red oils, and its implications — from the red planet to hell — are of a point beyond the vanishing point. I-75 in this picture plane could just as easily be the River Styx, and there's no evidence to say that it's not. There's nothing to say that it is, either: Even in blazing red, Austen's sentiments are not easily deciphered. The work is not without a sort of narrative, but it's buried in a hieroglyphic code.

"Berlin Apartment," a small painting on paper, is laden with clues. Physically and visually, it's the antithesis of "Mapping": A dark surface coated with watery white gesso enervates the image. The painting's structure and, consequently, energy come instead from a red-orange architectural outline (of an apartment Austen rented in Berlin). This is the element that transforms the abstract into the representational; without it, space would be irrelevant because there would be no express reference point to define it as such. The superimposed appearance of the outline (thus the apartment) is more suggestive. It classifies order as both supplemental and necessary — in effect, a prosthetic for existence.

Order plays a fundamental role in Austen's aesthetic; grids — as organizational and decorative devices — are recurring motifs in the pieces. It's easy to perceive the grid as an obstruction to space; however, it's specifically the grid (which is not always visible) that ultimately facilitates the extension of space in the painting.

The sprawling (78 inches high and 55 inches wide) "Marrakesch" is the culmination of the grid system. It signifies a place, like many of the works, but in an entirely personal vernacular, like a secret language. A mass of white box shapes move in a dizzying diagonal against an indigo plane, and finally dissipate into a dark void — all of which is divided by white lines into 70 squares.

It's not even a landscape via symbolism; it's closer to coordinate geometry. Though the division of the plane apparently contains the chaos of the imagery, the chaos is itself the illusion of an order derived from compulsive repetition: The indigo alone is the product of layers of crisscrossed brush strokes. The grid simply demarcates the space.

In the majority of the pieces order is less explicit. "Untitled," "Marrakesch"'s closest relative in the exhibition, is similarly reliant on the grid — but to a more passive end. Mountains are identifiable icons (though linear, repeated renderings preclude any traditional interpretation). And Austen's aesthetic — lithe, imperfect brush strokes; organic colors — is too naturalistic to be completely structured. Meaning in the paintings is culled from a discrete reservoir of senses and mental images — the viewer's as much as the artist's. Syntax is therefore no longer the foundation for communication, but rather instinct, and an individual perception of a person or place can be universal.

The reciprocal of the infinite space in the works is the absence of space — or defined space, at least. There's a ghostly quality to the paintings, as if space was nothing more than light and shadows. The original ideal of art — to create something from nothing — seems at times inverted here. But more often, it absorbs the subject: Filtered through Austen, tracts of dark and light blue, juxtaposed between quick red brush strokes (2001's "Manhattan"), appear more real than the place itself. Like Franz Kline's "New York, N.Y.," an Abstract Expressionist take on the New York landscape, the subject is the reflection.

Austen's work is also chronologically ambiguous. "Germanic" is a pointed adjective in art, and the grand genealogy of 20th-century German art — with all its agony, ecstasy and appropriations — is inevitably visible in his work. The primitive-naïf techniques of Die Brücke are resurrected in the thick black lines and brutal strokes of "Unititled (Berlin)," along with the emotive commentary of Käthe Kollwitz in the thin, tenuous lines and stoic figures of "Procession" — and in the growing glimpses of the Detroit landscape, in which the scattered detritus of the city easily mirrors Kollwitz's WWI rubble.

They also resurrect the notion of surface as a corollary to content. There will always be room in the arts for "serious painting," minus the never-ending facades of fashion and decoration. The physical presence of the works is formidable, regardless of the space of the canvas.

The work is more contemporary than that, however, and sometimes less. The protocols of Austen's paintings function today within their own sphere. There's an occasional nod to pop culture, but they repeatedly elude assimilation into it. Germany and Detroit are the modernist models of the Europe and America — perhaps the last remaining ones — and their influence is discernable in the pieces. They are polite, but guarded, and aimed toward something greater than themselves. The real riddle of contemporary art — art for no reason — is futile in a one-man universe. This is the place that continues forever, inasmuch as it ever exists. | **RDW**

*Paintings from the Studio of Hartmut Austen runs from September 20–November 1, with an opening reception from 7–10 p.m. on Saturday, Sept. 20. For further information, call 248.989.8889.*

*Natalie's polite, but guarded. Email natalie@getrealdetroit.com.*