



CAROL BROWN GOLDBERG
WASHINGTON

but it hangs together surprisingly well in *Artempo*, unified and given perspective by the constant proximity of art and artifacts to Fortuny's printed and woven fabrics, theatrical lighting systems, paintings, and plaster casts. While the Fortuny Museum often plays host to contemporary art exhibitions, it has not attempted an exhibition this ambitious since Peter Greenaway's *Watching Water*, 1993, which, like *Artempo*, conveyed hyperbolic spectacle and wide-ranging intellectual curiosity in equal measure.

With chiseled or crumbling plaster and fresco replacing the second floor's opulent fabrics and elegant light fixtures, the Palazzo's spartan and undecorated top floor houses examples of the tactile minimalism that is one of Vervoordt's chief collecting interests. Heaped on the floor like rocks, small video monitors display Richard Serra's *Hands Scraping*, 1968, Peter Fischli and David Weiss' *The Course of Things*, 1987, and Antonin Artaud's *Surcouf, King of the Privateers*, 1924. Reductivist paintings and sculptures by Fontana and Gunther Uecker jostle with an eroded nineteenth-century Dayak figure, a Sukothai-style Khmer ceramic assemblage from the twelfth or thirteenth century, Shiro Tsujimura's vigorously rusticated contemporary ceramic jug and vase forms, and César's *Compression*, 1970.

The vestiges of Mariano Fortuny's prodigious creativity hover like friendly ghosts throughout *Artempo*, unifying and harmonizing more than three hundred artworks and artifacts. Awkward exhibition title aside, slogans are absent from this show—there is no *ars longa, vita brevis* here. It turns out that the elimination of restrictive modifiers like “long” and “short” or “old” and “new” can surprisingly invigorate our understanding of basic issues like beauty and wonder, life and death. Like Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, *Artempo* is a deeply romantic enterprise that, more than a few times, affords “a flash of lightning [that] illuminated the object and discovered its shape to me; its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect more hideous than belongs to humanity.”

—Christopher French

Looking back on the course of its history, painterly abstraction can be broken down into a series of stages that rely on various compositional devices such as the circle, square, stripe, grid, and a host of drips and splatters. Today, as abstract painting embarks on its second century, its promise of visual expression raises questions. Do abstract paintings still speak to us with a sense of urgency? Do they strive to reflect the world around us or unveil some of life's many mysteries? Do these self-contained systems referring to nothing outside themselves continue to stimulate the eye and mind, despite their limited, predictable framework of shape, color, and technique? *Listening to Ivy*, a large survey of recent paintings by Carol Brown Goldberg, provides a remarkable sampling of the unexhausted potential of abstraction and its visual tedium [American University Museum; September 4—October 21, 2007].

Goldberg deploys a wide range of abstract vocabularies by building her compositions through the sequential addition of discrete layers. For example, in *Listening to Ivy # 1*, 2005, a sparse scattering of white drips and splatters articulates a solid black ground, which peeks out from behind a dense screen of red and pink circles. These circles' color values gradually shift from intense red at the perimeter to virtually white tints at the center of the canvas. The painting captures our attention through its contradictory presence. The sense of motion created by the white drips and splatters counters the solidity and stasis bestowed by the screen of circles. Moreover, as the circles' color shifts to ever lighter and brighter tints, the eye becomes aware of a progression of rectangles across the surface. It also seizes on a loss of detail that can be interpreted as a type of surface glare, despite the flatness of the artist's acrylics. Flaws also declare themselves. Inexactly executed circles undermine the notion of mathematical precision. So does a line of circles squeezed out of existence by two adjacent rows.

Several of the earliest paintings on view operate in similarly engaging ways. Steel-blue circles laid over

orange, pink, and yellow drips on a white ground charge *Passion of Winter*, 2005, with a visual energy that is simultaneously icy and electrical. Similarly, the yellow and red splatters advancing out of the nearly white center of *Big Fire at Forest Park Crosswalk*, 2006, effectively evoke the scarring found on a heat-damaged surface.

But Goldberg's paintings quickly lose steam when she increases the number of splatters, adds glitter, uses silver paints and stencil patterns, and leaves windows in her trademark network of circles. The smattering of colors filling such centered portals smacks of sci-fi scenery. In fact, since most of the works occupying two floors of the museum are from this body of work, they overburden the exhibition. Their frame-within-a-frame structure sets up a dichotomous relationship that lacks the rigor, subtle complexity, and associative possibilities of the earlier works. Compounding the deceleration are several interesting paper pulp paintings executed between 1992 and 2006, which would have been better served if exhibited in a separate, adjacent space.

When Goldberg abandons this window format, things begin to look up again. The irregular border of ordered circles laid over paint splatters and stenciled images of target-like forms endow *Lucid Dreams of Purple Snow*, 2007, with three-dimensionality and a sense of motion that rekindle excitement. And, with no network of circles to speak of, *BP#3*, 2007, and *BP#4*, 2007, capture the viewer's attention by virtue of their nakedness. Though these paintings could be faulted for appearing too decorative, their energy and the inclusion of a repetitive, columnar substructure reminiscent of an architectural façade foreshadow productive avenues of exploration. *Listening to Ivy* stands as an absurdist proposition—distraction allows us to see otherwise unnoticeable details. As interesting as this concept and some of the paintings prove to be, this survey of Goldberg's output would have been much more stimulating had the exhibition been radically edited.

—John Gayer

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Carol Brown Goldberg, *Listening to Ivy #1*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 72 inches; *Listening to Ivy: Rushing Toward Blue*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 72 inches (courtesy of the artist)