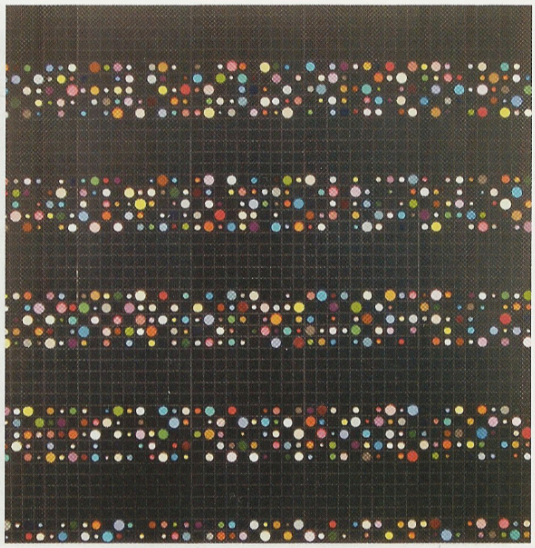

severed heads, elongated torsos, human-flower hybrids, and Pinocchio noses are just some of the exquisitely rendered unusual forms to be discovered. To learn how to fabricate these features, Boyle has spent the past few years absorbed in porcelain's techniques and storybook history. Named by Marco Polo and first brought to Europe from Asia along the silk route in the thirteenth century, porcelain was a prized possession eagerly sought after for cabinets of curiosities. Its secret formula eluded Westerners for centuries, until an alchemist discovered its clay and mineral combination in the early 1700s. At that time, owning porcelain was a male, aristocratic privilege. Since, it has become predominantly the domain of female hobby-crafters.

Boyle sought these women out. With full knowledge of her predilection for the menacing and bizarre, they, in turn, have shared with her their molds for torsos, limbs, and heads. Boyle sculpts everything else by hand herself: flowers, bases, exotic birds—a touch of Chinoiserie—and most of all, the layering of lace clothing. Invented in Germany in the eighteenth century, this process involves draping lace dipped in liquid porcelain over the figure, which then burns off in the kiln, leaving behind its delicate pattern.

It would be imprudent to project our own feelings of pain and morality on this women's world where roses sprout from arms, where abrasions and bruises are not uncommon, and where amazing feats of autoeroticism are performed. Since the laws dictating the inner life of each figure elude us, we can only revel in a transcendent view of their surfaces. Unfortunately, the inclusion of even a single male figurine—a direct quote of Disney's Beast—immediately installs a prince in this Amazonian queendom, momentarily breaking the spell of the self-contained realms each miniature seems to inhabit.

—Sandra Firmin

CHRISTOPHER FRENCH
WASHINGTON

With the revival of interest in the Washington Color School now underway, the idea of showing new paintings made of dots, circles, and squares initially struck me as a way to capitalize on a trend. What better complement to Gene Davis' stripes of the 1960s than to exhibit works echoing Larry Poons' systematic musings, Victor Vasarely's optical effects, or Robert Irwin's hives of dots? But seeing Christopher French's exhibition *New Paintings: Contradictory Resemblances* [Marsha Mateyka Gallery, April 8—May 20, 2006] changed everything as his lack of compliance with the tenets of such predecessors quickly hit home.

The initial surprises came from the compact size of French's images and the materials out of which they are made. Most of the dozen exhibited paintings were less than two feet square. As such, expectations of any of the effects associated with large-scale works were clearly dashed. Up close, one sees that the composite structure of French's work takes them into the realm of collage—he typically adheres Braille paper to linen or wood panels. The grids formed by the lines of raised dots in the paper also impart an unanticipated tactile quality to the paintings' surfaces, thus suggesting that they may be enjoyed by touch as well as sight.

Standing back from the paintings, one becomes preoccupied with the range of color, the sizes of the circles, and finding a key to the work. The earliest painting, *50-50 Proposition in 3/4 Time*, 2004, is the only one that offers a literal representation. By means of its title and visual organization, it evokes a musical score. Here, the array of circles implies loops and curlicues that intimate notation or an electronic visualization of sound.

In other paintings, the dense deployment of circles reminds one of the "vanishing" and "transformation" plates utilized in color vision discrimination tests. Such an analogue reinforces the will to find an image lodged within seemingly random arrangements. The inclination to squint arises frequently, but all attempts to decode the visual information continue to confound the viewer. In some works bright tones, such as pink and turquoise, pulse against a monotone background. In others, mottled paint handling contrasts with opaque round forms. *Desirable Incognitos*, 2006, and *My Name is Red*, 2005, exhibit color families of yellow and red, respectively. Equivocal references to game boards, maps of star clusters, spray patterns, or the punch design on gilded icons may all be made.

Ultimately the paintings force one to see them for what they are: intricate explorations of color, texture, and form. French combines the seemingly disparate forms of circle and square in ways that simultaneously connote harmony and contradiction. The square within square format that founds these pieces is expressed spatially in low relief through the physical layering of components and the presence of prefabricated deformations in the paper. Though the juxtaposition of circles conforms to the planar network, logical arrangements with regard to color or size are nonetheless absent. In contrast to the squares, the color circles express space visually by advancing and receding. Some appear to float in front of the background color. Others sink into it. Bridging the two shapes are the raised dots and the horizontal and vertical brush strokes evident in many circles. The former echoes the rows of circles, the latter evokes the x and y axes of the grid.

It may seem a tedious exercise to analyze the paintings in this fashion, but this is also what makes them so interesting. The ways in which French integrates opposing forms, applies his colors, and uses a text-based material for its visual impact produce a complex visual interplay that enthralls both the eye and the mind.

—John Gayer

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: **Shary Boyle,** *Untitled*, 2004, lace-draped porcelain, china paint, thread, height: 28 cm (collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; photo: Natalie Matutschovsky); **Christopher French,** *50-50 Proposition in 3/4 Time*, 2004, Braille paper with oil and acrylic on wood panel, 48 x 48 inches (courtesy of the artist and Marsha Mateyka Gallery)