

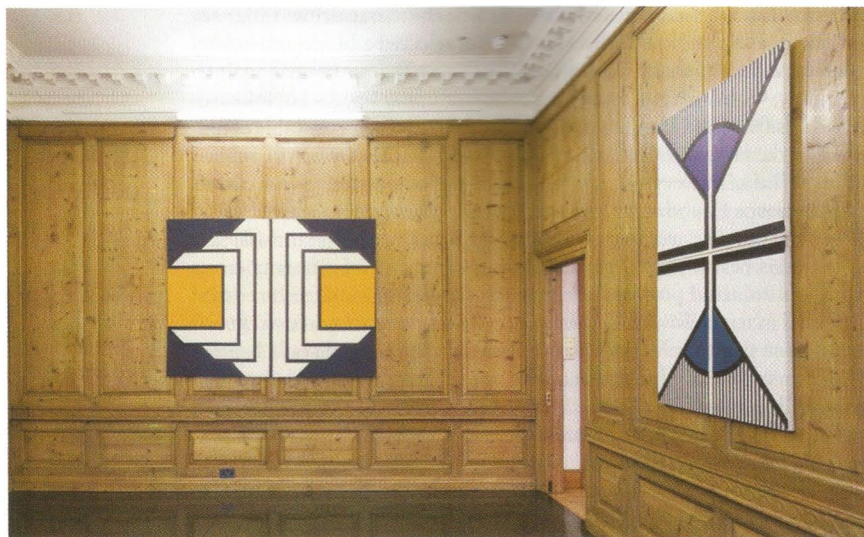
Imre Bak

CARL KOSTYÁL

The now-septuagenarian Hungarian painter Imre Bak describes 1968 as a pivotal moment. A visit to Documenta 4 showed him the radical changes taking place across the Atlantic. That, together with trips to London's Tate in the previous years and his work with a German gallery that exhibited American art, opened the young artist's eyes to innovations in abstraction—particularly what he called “the emerging American art scene, when the abstract versions of Pop Art appeared, such as Hard-Edge and Color Field Painting (Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly).” Offering a concise picture of the intellectual journey that Bak has since taken, via eight works ranging in date from 1968 through 2005, this exhibition, curated by the British artist Peter Peri, was Bak's first in the UK.

The show also gave a glimpse of the shifting intellectual currents in abstract painting across the decades. Despite moving from absolute abstraction to Conceptualism and structuralist shaped paintings, followed by a postmodern turn, Bak stayed true to the language of flat geometry. While Stella, for instance, has remained resolutely nonrepresentational, the Hungarian's brand of abstraction retains a hint of representation. One of the earliest paintings in the exhibition, *Orange*, 1969, shows two orange squares on each side either pressing into or being pressed out by a series of central white frames emanating from the center. With their heavy, black, Lichtensteinesque outlines, these white brackets or cornices cradle the orange forms. Is the image a side view or a plan view? Perhaps it could be a schematic depiction of a robot or insect head with bright orange eyes? As in the work of Nicholas Krushenick, a certain representational ambiguity—despite an apparent graphic clarity—runs through Bak's oeuvre.

Pattern and schematic representation play out in Bak's next group of paintings through evocations of landscape and reflection. For instance,



View of “Imre Bak,”
2016. From left:
Orange, 1969;
Reflection III, 1974.
Photo: Plastiques
Photography.

Reflection III, 1974, could depict a moonrise between two white mountain peaks. The bottom of the image symmetrically reflects the top, with the only difference being the color of two half circles. However, the painting is also divided by a central cross into four quadrants of triangles and orb shapes, with each a mirror reflection of its opposite. Here, positive representational forms flip-flop into abstract negative spaces and back again, as mountains turn into voids and moons into arrowheads. The result is a kaleidoscopic multiplication of image fragments that puts the structural nature of representation and abstraction into play.

Where Bak's earlier works play with a centralized configuration and bold optical designs that often result in an iconic singularity, the later paintings, with their softer palette, hint at narrative by focusing on the relations between elements. For example, *Ausgezeichnet* (Excellent) and *Epizode*, both 2005, comprise three or four rectangular shapes overlapped by a final hovering rectilinear frame. Similar forms, often with a diagrammatic or hierarchical quality, appear in both canvases but in different configurations, like developing characters. Yet, as simple geometric shapes, they remain abstract and ambiguous.

Writing in 2002 about “the infinite in painting,” Bak remarked that his emphasis had been on the existential dimension of art because he felt that it had been neglected in recent times. This small sample of Bak's oeuvre offered a sense of intellectual restlessness, a constant need to either reinvent the language of geometric abstraction or use it to explore different subjects. Perhaps this restlessness reflects the existential trait of anxiety, which one rarely expects to encounter in hard-edge abstraction. In any case, just as the recent belated discovery of Carmen Herrera gave us an unexpected lesson in how to keep painting fresh while out of the limelight, catching up with Bak offered a similar opportunity.

—Sherman Sam