artcritical
the online magazine of art and ideas

FEATURES ▸ COMMENTARY

Wednesday, August 12th, 2015

Standing in the Shadows: On Seeing Andrew Forge and Hearing Morton Feldman

by **David Carbone**

Painter David Carbone explores the affinities between painter and composer provoked by visiting Forge's show at Betty Cuningham this summer (June 4 to August 14, 2015) and hearing Feldman's *Neither* at New York City Opera several years earlier.

Andrew Forge, April, 1991-92. Oil on canvas, 50 x 80 inches. Courtesy of Betty Cuningham Gallery

Experiencing this marvelous show of works by Andrew Forge (1923-2002) at Betty Cuningham Gallery, the second they have organized, something of an epiphany brought composer Morton Feldman to this visitor's mind. I am not suggesting a co-extensive relationship between music and visual art – even Kandinsky, in his correspondence with Schoenberg, refuted that notion – but there are parallel qualities and ideas explored by Feldman and Forge that sustain this connection.

It is notable that both wrote on their respective fields. A polymath, Forge was also an articulate and insightful writer and teacher. His extensive, as yet uncollected writings include books and essays on a diverse range of significant artists: Paul Klee, Claude Monet and Robert Rauschenberg, to name a few. Feldman also wrote on painters and poets who had influenced his development and those pieces have been collected in *Give My Regards to Eighth Street.* Central to both were the examples of John Cage and Rauschenberg on how to escape from the binding aspects of their respective traditions.

At the Cunningham Gallery we have been offered a selection of three types of work: watercolors of floating and touching dots and dashes, some coalescing into fields of color; watercolor grids of shifting columns; and oils of densely worked color fields opening into ever changing networks of shimmering atmospheres, telegraphing to our eyes Forge's sense of mapped sight and motion.

Morton Feldman, ca. 1986. Photo by Irene Haupt.

Seen broadly, the watercolors offer a way into Forge's thinking process. He created them as a release from the dense complications of his oils. In the four works of strictly gridded columns, thin quivering strokes slide laterally across the vertical columns, sometimes partially overlapping others and playing against the rigidness of the interval. This mosaic-like tessellation of color notations carry melodic movements, punctuated by accents of dark or opposing saturated colors. All of these works are in dialogue with Klee's magic squares, and the North African rugs that inspired him.

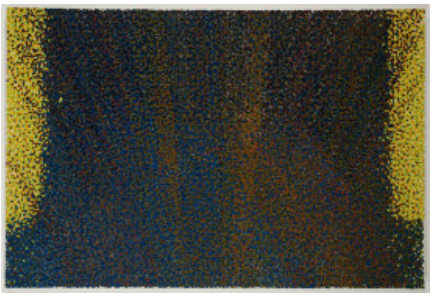
Feldman also expressed an interest in Near and Middle Eastern rugs: "Music and the designs or a repeated pattern in a rug have much in common. As a composer, I respond to…a rug's coloration and its creation of a microchromatic overall hue…for most artists the structural concerns are uppermost and out of it comes content…." (*Crippled Symmetry* (1981)

For Forge, the *objective* process of making a painting by following a set of rules for structural development was a means of paralleling nature's ways of forming. Writing on Klee (1954), Forge quoted from the latter's essay, *On Modern Art* (1922): "With the gradual growth of such a structural image before our eyes an association of ideas gradually insinuates

itself which may tempt one to a material interpretation." This quote would become key to his mature process and it is telling that it was used in a discussion of Klee's *Classic Coast* (1931), one of the great mock-mosaic works employing only dots and bars of color in an extensive, shifting, asymmetric grid. In his struggle to find a satisfying relationship between looking, making and meaning, Forge ultimately discovered that the notational marks were charged with an expressive quality that ultimately "generates … subject, not the other way around," as he later wrote in the brochure for an exhibition he curated at the New York Studio School, *Observation: Notation* (2000).

This relationship with Klee and other artists is what Forge referred to as his "internal audience" where work speaks to work, across time, space and culture. Seen this way, a work of art is part of a greater whole. Each new work may change our sense of the past, even as the past may change the present. This continual restructuring can also manifest within the history of an artist's work. This kind of thinking is what Forge thought "distinguished an artist." (*891*, 1985)

A small vertical landscape of heavy atmosphere is titled *Aurélia* (1985) in allusion to Gérard De Nerval's famous Romantic account of his descent into madness. This seems to parallel Forge's desire to form a method of mapping the world that was objective in process and subjective in affect, all while not being representational. Two works from the same year conjure Roman torso fragments portrayed as spectral emanations appearing or dissolving into simple notation.



Andrew Forge, Heavy Hemlocks II, 2000. Oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches. Courtesy of Betty Cuningham Gallery

Where Forge moves further away from recognizable forms, his landscape titles allow us a way into the work even as it may suppress our access to his inner dialogue. In *Willow* (1999) Forge synthesizes Monet and Jules Olitski into something unique and radiant. In both versions of the dark *Heavy Hemlocks* (1999) Forge approaches Morris Louis' veils with a suggestive energy that has an existential intensity.

As I began to move back and forth between two large and transcendent works by Forge, *April* (1991-92) and *November* (1980-81), each painting opened up slowly, illuminated by a synthetic, intellectualized light. *April* evades prettiness in an airy softness of buzzing pulses, echoing Pierre Bonnard's more apparitional works, and in *November,* a shadowy palette yields an ocean of chromatic patterns. Exceedingly dense, both works are lightened by the amount of white ground variously peeking through, creating a Bezold effect. With their flowing networks of shifting hues, these paintings are polyphonic in the way they changed radically from a distance of 3 feet to 6 feet and again from across the room. As one moves back certain configurations appear and then disappear as one's brain synthesizes the color oppositions. At the furthest remove, the canvases have an atomized geometrical structure.

It was during this immersion that I was suddenly aware of a parallel experience, an extraordinary evening at New York City Opera (2011), listening to Feldman's monodrama, *Neither*, for soprano and orchestra based on a short text by Samuel Beckett. As the composer noted in his last interview (1987), with Everett C. Frost, "The subject essentially is: whether you're in the shadows of understanding or non-understanding. I mean finally you're in the shadows. You're not going to arrive at any understanding at all: You're just left there holding this—the hot potato which is life."

Andrew Forge, Willow, 1999. Oil on canvas, 42 x 44 inches. Courtesy of Betty Cuningham Gallery

This stunning music sustained a chromatic atmosphere which had drawn me in, repeating phrase fragments that seemed to have much in common with Forge's networks of dots and dashes, billowing into varied densities of space and light. In this hour long piece, Feldman achieved a moment held in duration–vertical time–unexpected in music, but central to painting. Every luminous chord changed so gradually that what seemed movement in the moment, was reflected in repeated patterns subtly shifted by tempo and his orchestration of instruments. Here too, segments of listening time resembled my various positions in relation to each canvas. Or as Feldman put it, "I am involved with the contradiction in not having the sum of the parts equal the whole."

Both Feldman's and Forge's works achieve lucid-dream states. In my experience, it was the especially large *scale*, whether spatial or durational, that produced profoundly transporting totalities. The disquieting mood for Feldman had "to do with instrumental images," whereas the indistinct inner worlds in Forge rely on the diffusion of color into unnamable but apprehensible feeling. After a number of gallery visits, I haven't come to the end of these works: all their secrets hide in plain sight.