

Art in America

March 1995

Clytie Alexander at Victoria Anstead

Of note in Clytie Alexander's first New York solo (after a decade of shows in Los Angeles) are five paintings ranging in size from 30 by 24 inches to 80 by 72 inches, all in the same format: five vertical bars of hot earth tones, spaced evenly, within a luminous field of a similar but lighter hue. Before you have a chance to say that you've seen this sort of thing before, I'll tell you that you haven't. While sharing forms and techniques developed by Reinhardt and Rothko, Alexander is nonetheless a landscape painter.

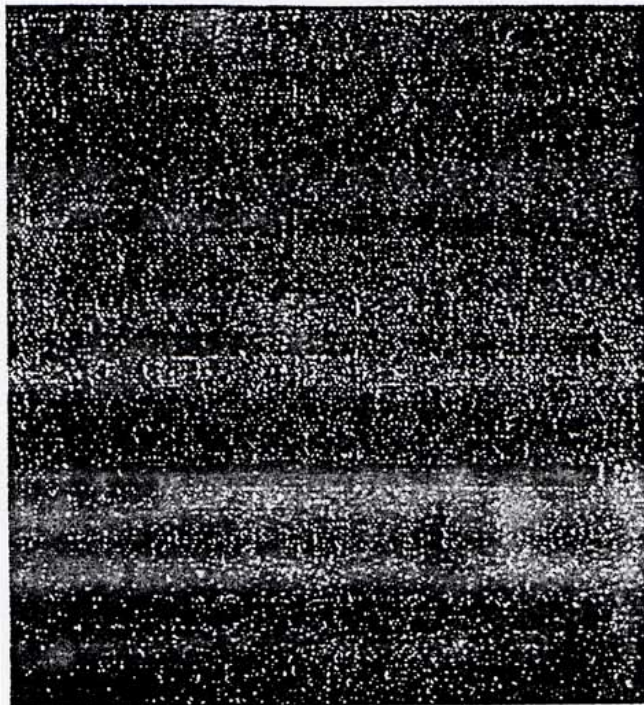
There are some places in the American West so seared with sunlight that all shapes fall away into a general brightness. Specificity of shape gives way to the specificity of time of day. This is Alexander's material. She is alert to its nuances. In *Study for Pavsya/1-23*, the sun must be close to its zenith. The light is dimmer in the show's largest canvas, *The Fire in the Lacquer House/1-37*. It is far later in the day.

You have to sit with these paintings for a while. When you do, you may find that they become objects of contemplation, allowing you to attain states of mind like those achieved by meditative techniques. It's not surprising that they have South Asian titles.

The paintings, however, do not promote a collapse of subject and object, viewer and viewed, into undifferentiated oneness. You experience what you see as something quite distinct from yourself. You are not even *in* the light you see. Alexander's California studio is in the Owens Valley. The valley's eastern slope marks the beginning of the harsh desert environment that culminates in Death Valley, but its western slope is covered by the lush green pines of the Sierra Nevada.

Painting the bright light of the desert from the safety of the forest, Alexander provides us with a cool and calm vision of a world that would often be too hot to bear, were we really in it. This union of distance and intensity provides the pleasures of the romantic tradition of landscape, without being romantic.

—Edmund Leites



Clytie Alexander: *The Fire in the Lacquer House/1-37*, 1993, oil on linen, 80 by 72 inches; at Victoria Anstead.