

## Odili Donald Odita at Florence Lynch

From the glancingly horizontal, jangly-cool television buzz of Odili Donald Odita's abstract paintings of a few years ago, landscape spaces and even figural references have recently emerged. Influences are equally American and African; swooping angles and translucent planes evoke the suave, perky energy of midcentury "boomerang" design and broadcast industry logos as much as Yoruba and Igbo textiles and the West African savannah. The gliding angles that previously resided at and, by implication, beyond the edges of the canvas have been redirected to elusively figurative ends. The five large acrylics in "Notes From Paradise," this mid-career Nigerian-born American artist's latest solo show, feature strongly vertical components. In *Peace/Pieces* (84 by 109 inches; all works 2004), a towering, faceted structure in blues and blue-grays interrupts rhythmic strata of warm earth tones; the fragmented left half of the painting might be a detail of a similar totem. The new work is as fastidiously designed and immaculately crafted as ever; discrete areas of flat, matte color are fitted like joinery. The cautiously vibrant palette is close in value, as though seen through a scrim or filtered by memory.

Odita's tectonics of chroma is strongest in *Dutch Light* (63 by 78 inches). Four creased, twisting fronds in forceful hues snake



Odili Donald Odita: *Blaze*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 70 by 90 inches; at Florence Lynch.

from bottom to top, yielding five massive negative shapes in milky tints of blue, green-blue, ocher, yellow and green. Each has the inarguable presence of a torso. Figure and ground relationships are less equivocal in *The Elements* (84 by 109 inches), wherein the same four fronds, inverted, are superimposed on simplified geometric landscapes stacked like frames of film. The bleached, hazy colors of *Blaze* radiate equatorial heat; the surprisingly literal *Parting Water* (both 70 by 90 inches), which sports a snazzy wave motif, is less convincing.

All works of art are self-portraits, more or less. Odita, whose primary subject is himself, engages a semiotics of heritage by including 28 smallish mixed-medium drawings, based on media photos of life in Africa and the African diaspora. (Also included in the show was a 9-by-10-foot wall painting called *Black on Black* and a small minimalist sculpture.) The drawings, grouped in a small gallery, are as direct and urgent as the paintings are polished; they signal that to consider the paintings as primarily formal constructions in the supposedly international modernist tradition, without regard to the cultural identity of the artist, is to risk misreading them. Still, for many viewers the interest is how Odita, like Sarah Morris, Richmond Burton and Helmut Federle in different ways, reconstitutes pattern in a distinctive palette to evoke an unfamiliar and perhaps largely imaginary homeland.

—Stephen Maine

## Ernest Briggs at Anita Shapolsky

As I walked through this show of mostly untitled paintings from the 1950s and '60s, I found myself checking the wall labels to confirm that Ernest Briggs was the sole artist on display. Not only did the 16 canvases vary greatly in size, but they also possessed a stylistic breadth that read like a concise history of the New York School. Yet if Briggs's abstract paintings can often resemble the work of his better-known peers, they collectively represent an artist who was not so much derivative as protean.

Before moving to New York in 1953, Briggs studied painting in San Francisco under Clyfford Still, whose influence may be detected in early works, like a mostly brown and black canvas of 1949 that contains a Still-like fissure of taupe pigment at its center. But where his teacher's passages of contrasting color tend to suggest slow, geologic movements, Briggs's central slash of paint looks swift and sudden, erupting from the surrounding darkness like a crack of bright light.

An explosive energy is also conveyed by a composition from 1958, one of many large, unprimed canvases that Briggs stained with thinned oil paints in the late 1950s. While obviously informed by Helen Frankenthaler's earlier

Ernest B  
29% by 2

