

LINDA STARK

THINGS IN
THE MAKING

Christopher Miles

THERE'S A FINE LINE between a romantic and a sap. The split-hair difference is the reason why I don't always enjoy looking at Linda Stark's work. I walk away from it having to admit that I am at least a situational romantic, willing under certain conditions to buy into certain notions when my best judgment tells me to get out. Her work brings me just a little closer to being a sap. A sap isn't necessarily someone who has been duped so much as someone who has submitted to a wild goose chase. And a wild goose chase isn't necessarily a pursuit of nothing so much as a pursuit of something one might never get hold of. That's the real fear. Stark is going to make me think about expression, emotion, beauty, the sublime, and if prior generations are any indication, it is a line of thought I shan't have the satisfaction of following through.

What Stark makes in her studio are by definition paintings, but I choose to think of them just as things. While painting might describe the sum of the requisite parts, the term fails to get at what sort of wholes these parts become. Stark's process is—to use a word that makes me gag but for which I can find no more comfortable substitute—transformative, and while I tend to regard talk about paintings taking on their own identity or presence as so much fluff, I find myself, having already examined all other possible ways out, left with little choice but to let the fluff fly.

Stark's works are the products of layering controlled pours, drips, puddles and brushed areas of fluid oil paint. Often repeating the same applications of paint over and over each day for months, Stark invests much of her labor in carefully rotating and tilting her panels. In so

doing, the artist encourages the paint to flow evenly and in specific directions, producing lines that achieve luscious mass and density, as well as patches of color that swell in their middles. Elsewhere in Stark's repertoire, more dramatic reliefs result from the artist waiting for wet paint to thicken and then "peaking" or teasing the paint upward by catching its skin with the tip of a fine brush, creating spiky ridges and abrupt protrusions.

Discussions of how works are made can grow tedious, but in the case of Stark, process provides a significant point of entry. How Stark's works come to be, after all, is a major factor in exactly what they come to be. "Be" is a key word, as these things always seem more about becoming and being than about showing and telling—able to field a wide variety of characteristics not because they suggest or point to, but because they embody



FIVE FINGER FLAME, 1995.
OIL ON PANEL, 10.5 x 14 x 3
INCHES. PHOTO SUE
TALLON. COLLECTION
BRUCE CHERNOFF.
COURTESY JACK SHAINMAN,
NEW YORK, AND ANGLES,
SANTA MONICA.

comment

BLUE RIBBON, 1995, OIL ON CANVAS ON PANEL, 16 x 19 x 3 INCHES. PHOTO SUE TALLON. COLLECTION DALLAS PRICE. COURTESY JACK SHAINMAN, NEW YORK, AND ANGLES, SANTA MONICA.

and essentially are many things.

Stark's paintings are realist in a fundamental rather than academic sense, as more often than not they are what they are; that is to say, they are seldom pictures so much as the things other paintings depict. They just happen to be made out of paint. Her weaves really are weaves, woven out of endless, calculatedly overlapping drips. Likewise, her ribbons are ribbons of paint, her skins are skins, and the knots arising in the center of her peppermint-twist-like rotations are knots that result, like all knots, from the twisting, intertwining, and overlapping of strands.

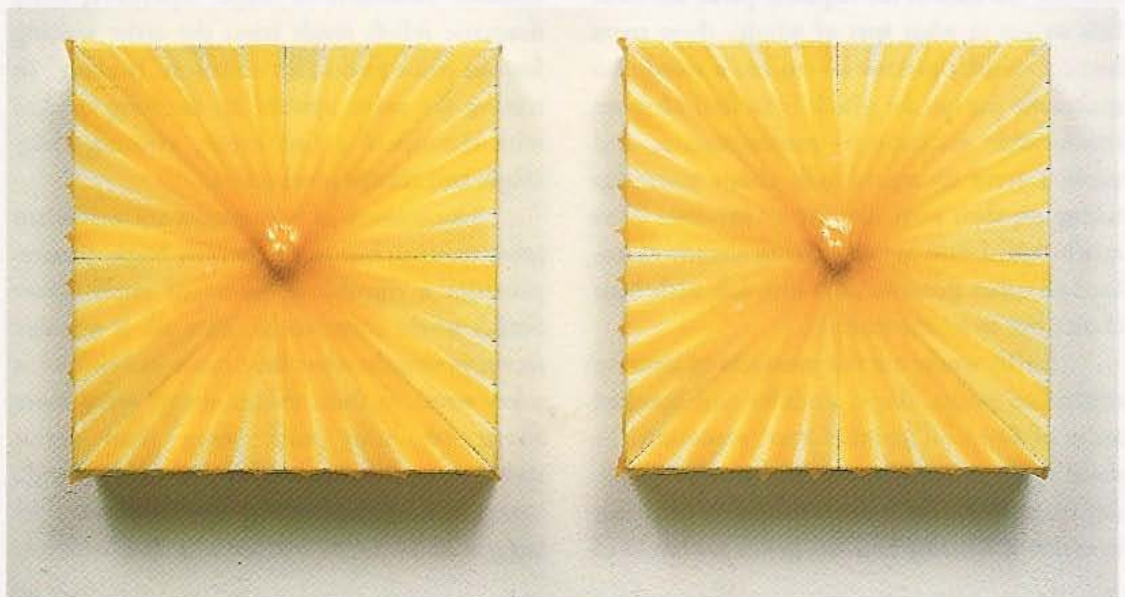
Stark's things jump so directly into the viewer's reality that an odd sort of empathy even kicks in. There is something shudderingly evocative in the nipples that grace some of Stark's panels, which garner their erectness from repeated wetting and teasing, and while it's a stretch to say that one could make a flame out of paint, Stark is getting very warm. An argument might be made that she is merely dabbling in the romper room of hyperrealist sculpture à la Duane Hanson, but Stark isn't playing a game of illusions or simulations. The nipples and flames she presents would never be mistaken for those that we know via our own bodies and senses, but they are nipples and flames nonetheless. Rather than making three-



dimensional pictures, Stark is taking the actual stuff of painting and making something tangible of it.

It is the tangibility of Stark's works that allows them to push a viewer down so many avenues, as the artist packs a seemingly disparate lot—traces of Pop, Abstraction, Symbolism, Minimalism, Surrealism—into her freshly built slices of reality. Such a smattering might not seem such a breath of fresh air amidst the suffocating vogue of postmodern pastiche, but Stark's works are the furthest things from smatterings. While painting seeking to cover broad and divergent territory often does so most conveniently via chaotic explosion across big picture planes, here it

YELLOW ROTATION DIPTYCH, 1994, OIL ON CANVAS ON PANEL, 7.5 x 7.5 x 2 INCHES EA. PHOTO SUE TALLON. COLLECTION FRED & DOTIE RUDOLF. COURTESY JACK SHAINMAN, NEW YORK, AND ANGLES, SANTA MONICA.



operates in the realm of controlled implosion, focusing scattered attention like a dot on a map—with a singular thing or icon, and within the confines of panels rarely over twelve inches square.

A sampling of these works reveals their capacity to run in multiple gears at once. The artist delivers stylized droplets of crimson paint that bristle with far-flung expressionist intensity, compete with any designer's distillation of the idealized teardrop shape, bounce glossy highlights that Lichtenstein would have had to paint in after the fact, and yet never fail to be spilt blood to their viewer. Elsewhere, her ribbons are contest prizes, paintcan sloshes, or gushers emanating from deflowered *Dating Game* daisies. Nearly all of Stark's panels cut the air with the slick surfaces of finish-fetish, and her simplified forms have the feel of vacuum-formed plastic. And while every one of Stark's things is necessarily self-referential in its uniqueness, each is outrightly symbolic if not emblematic.

Pictures, being representations we burden with our desires for as direct a communication as possible, tend to fall prey to additional expectations of linear logic that don't allow for Stark's multiple, even contradictory levels of stasis. But Stark gets away with it. Her works, like most actual things, relish in contradiction and encapsulate their own mixed metaphors, similes, and allegories. And it is the inability to take these things as simply as one might want them to simply be that allows the artist to serve them up with her own personal, sentimental, unapologetically spiritual twists: cheap sea horses, candy-corn color schemes and fuzzy rainbows that somehow manage to make one coo rather than puke and scratch one's noggin rather than roll one's eyes.

Stark has rightly recognized that the line between the trite and the heartfelt often runs parallel to the line between the conceptual and the actual. In offering up her sea horses, weaves, webs, swirls, whirls, flames and flowers, physically rather than illustratively, Stark rather

bluntly offers her viewers the option of reacquainting themselves with things they might rather not take seriously. Love, ecstasy, disappointment, death, and passion all seem more silly, distant, even dismissible in pictures, but when locked into things, woven and layered in, they become troublingly less trite. Distancing and dismissal, after all, are often the swiftest paths to numb comfort.

Ultimately, Stark's works are so engaging and so bothersome because if they are about anything, they are about what things (including paintings only by virtue of their prerequisite



parts) are made of, both physically and psychically: residue, build-up, layers. They are snail tracks, retreads, well-worn paths, repeated patterns, excess baggage, old foundations, fresh coats of paint. Like soap scum or pearls, Stark's works are the product of stuff which over time and under the right conditions, become something one cannot simply ignore.

Forget transformative: transubstantial might have been more the word I was looking for, though I'm not sure I could ever be completely comfortable drinking Stark's wine.

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CANDY CORN WEAVE, 1994, OIL ON CANVAS ON PANEL, 8.5 x 9.5 x 2 INCHES. PHOTO SUE TALLON. COLLECTION GARY & TRACY MEZZATESTA. COURTESY JACK SHAINMAN, NEW YORK, AND ANGLES, SANTA MONICA.