

MATTHEW ABBOTT, *Improbable Patterns Traced by Programmable Worms*, 2000, acrylic on linen, 78 x 78 in. Courtesy Pageant, Los Angeles.

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Back in 1992, when I first encountered Matthew Abbott's paintings, I was struck by their composure. The fact that their striking calmness was the paradoxical result of several (almost too many) raucous components—a swirling and topographical gesso ground, a complicated geometric pattern, intense even glaring colors and a suggestive phrase of text (a clue from a crossword puzzle, the answer subsequently becoming the title of the painting)—made the paintings not only all the more compelling, but also significantly ahead of the game at a time in which few were looking at painting for momentum. Abbott's paintings had movement precisely because of their restraint. From the beginning his paintings were simultaneously self-contained yet without limits as to how they could be read and used, simultaneously respecting and dismantling certain traditions of so-called formal and structural integrity.

Given that we now have an emerging generation of painters doing such things, it's good to see that Abbott's work has not backed down one bit. In this show—not only his first solo in

L.A., but also his first anywhere in five years—Abbott's paintings prove to be in the midst of the best kind of change: the kind that shatters the notion that transitional means not fully developed. In fact it is in their over-development that the work finds what is needed to move forward. If the earlier work relied heavily upon not only the puzzlement but also the promise of an "easy" connection between painting and viewer provided by the use of a crossword puzzle clue, then in his most recent work he proves that this was never an essential hook. Here, Abbott did present one painting that uses the device: *Chow IV (Subtitled Version)* (1998) includes the clue "DOG FOOD" at the bottom, interrupted occasionally by other brush features in exceedingly bright red, yellow, and orange—two large spirals that give the canvas a bilateral symmetry, and an array of what look like George Nelson atom clocks, each with six spokes with a little ball on its end, balls that turn out to be important because they hint at what we call the "painterly."

By adding "gesture," Abbott's new work has been transformed. In some of the other paintings included here, he has left behind the crossword puzzle clues and attached random letters

and numerals to a sort of molecular/matrix chart. For example, in *Improbable Patterns Traced By Programmable Worms* (2000), an undulating diamond pattern of purples and greens, interwoven with a large red/orange sphere, is ultimately reconfigured by a chart that clearly suggests some type of physical or genetic encoding. In *Surface of Revolution* (2000), large asterisk shapes have "interiors" that are almost Abstract Expressionist, cut-aways to an active area beneath the frozen motion of the swirling gesso grounds. By figuratively going deeper into his paintings, not to mention into even more of Painting's "movements," Abbott has found a way to open up his work yet still keep it completely together.

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