

Dan Christensen: *Conjugate*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 48 inches square.
All photos this article courtesy Spanierman Modern, New York.

Dan Christensen: Fluid Line, Funky Beat

An overview of the abstract painter's 40-year career samples his restless exploration of widely varying methods, tools and pictorial possibilities.

BY KAREN WILKIN



Left, Topaz Totem, 1975, acrylic on canvas, 86 by 18½ inches.

Right, Line Bind, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 84 by 40½ inches.



Mayan Mist, 1986, acrylic on wood, 30 by 24 inches.

A useful cliché, “painters’ painter” connotes not only excellence and dedication but also mastery at a level that can be best appreciated by fellow initiates. That the term can be applied with perfect accuracy to Dan Christensen was made clear by a recent mini-retrospective at Spanierman Modern, a well-chosen selection of ebullient abstract canvases spanning the four decades from 1967 to 2006.

The exhibition offered a disjunctive but fairly representative overview of Christensen’s restless exploration of a wide range of painting methods, tools and abstract pictorial possibilities. Impatient with familiar solutions and curious about the properties of his materials, Christensen investigated a remarkable variety of loosely related image-types, conceiving each freshly, like an improvisatory musician. The paintings on view included radiant, multicolor, whiplash-sprayed “drawings”; brooding, troweled-on monochromes; loose-jointed assemblies of color blocks; explosive fans of clustered strokes; freewheeling squiggles; combed parallel lines; luminous concentric circles; and dizzying loops and spirals of brilliant color. Each image seems a response to a particular set of propositions and challenges at the same time that it announces Christensen’s sustained connectedness to both the history of abstraction and the contemporary





5 or 6 P.M., 1994, acrylic on canvas,
47 by 99 inches.

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vernacular. Each was executed with consummate assurance and a fluid hand.

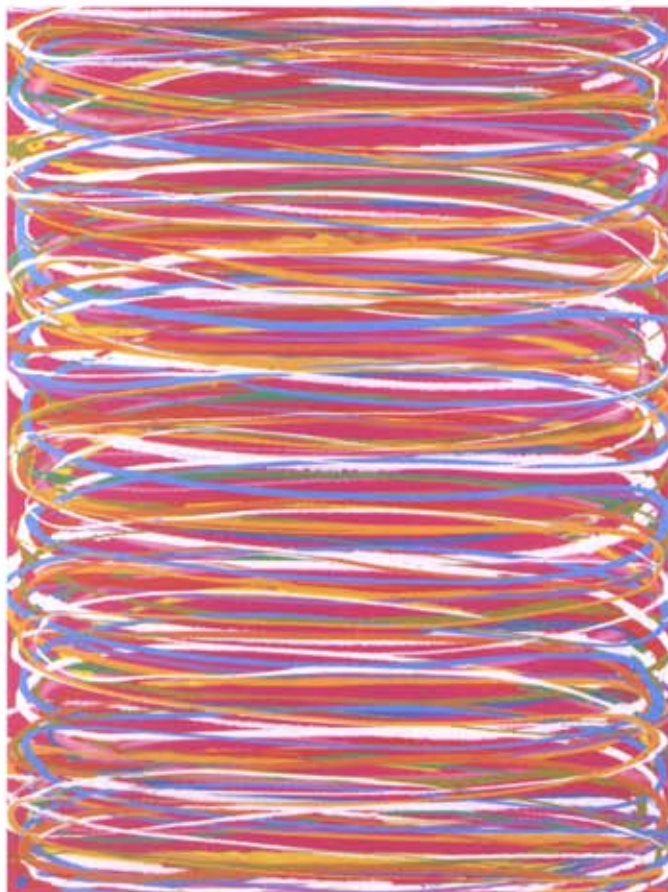
Over time, family resemblances present themselves among these apparently disparate images: characteristic assonances and harmonies of shape, syncopations of line and dazzling intensities of color. A virtuoso who could make paint do more or less anything he wished, Christensen turned textures, edges and the speed, direction and weight of lines into key elements in regulating mood and emotional temperature. Yet, in the end, the rude vitality of Christensen's pictures, the sense of energy they project, appears to be largely the result of his taste for all-stops-out, sat-

urated hues. Color, usually applied without modulation and with bold, snappy gestures, was Christensen's primary means of triggering associations. It's the eye-popping color of urban life, a reflection perhaps of daily encounters with advertising and all manner of consumer objects, and with the general cacophony of existence in the modern city—including, I suspect, its sounds. Christensen's generous, full-arm gestures, which, over the years, ranged from sleek loops and swirls to zany, cartoonlike scrawls, reinforce a sense of dialogue with the urban colloquial. (Interestingly enough, this hip urban flavor persisted even after the artist moved permanently to Long Island from New York City.)

Christensen (1942-2006) belonged to a generation of painters who came of age when Color Field painting, Pop art and Minimalism were competing for attention, and when alternative mediums were gaining popularity. The high-minded certainties of postwar abstraction were beginning to crumble under the pressure of new materials and formal possibilities, political crises and social concerns; the "relevance" of painting itself came into question. Just by mak-

ing paintings on canvas, Christensen declared his allegiance to the convictions of his immediate ancestors. The sprayed paintings of the late 1960s such as *Conjugate* (1967), with their sweeping gestures and flattened, ribbon-candy-like coils, can be seen as simple assertions of the canvases' particular dimensions. Yet the delicate, slightly blurred quality of the lines in these early "loop" pictures depends on the ability of thin jets of spray paint to be both precise and soft-edged; to be mechanical while also providing evidence of the movement of the hand.

The loop pictures are also very personal homages to the high art of the then recent past—reinterpretations of Jackson Pollock's tangled skeins of paint, or quirky dissections of Jules Olitski's all-over spray paintings. But Christensen's declaration of belonging to this lineage of modern masters is fused with an impulse toward graffiti (anticipating a movement that peaked a decade later). The combination of elegance and forthright, street-smart brashness in his loop paintings, like their fusion of the industrial and the handmade, seems, in retrospect, a sign (in every sense of the word) of the times in which they were made.



Rhymewriter #4, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 40 by 30 inches.

Instructive and pleasurable as it was to be reminded of Christensen's entire evolution, the exhibition's works from the last 10 years had the greatest impact. In their speedy, calligraphic gestures, blazing color and nuanced paint handling—which includes everything from the subtle halo of spray and emphatic, circling swoop of *Vanilla Blue* (1998) to the incisive, updated loops of *Rhymewriter #4* (2003) to the exuberant whorls and spatters of *Yellathrilla* (2006)—they sum up everything that came before, while announcing new variations on continuing themes. It's as if the artist had made the thrifty decision to revisit his own past and deepen his investigations of ideas not yet exhausted. Both the first and the last pictures in the show rang changes on rhythmic, looping drawing. The pale, disciplined *Conjugate* looked lyrical and classical, harmonious and formal; the luminous *Yellathrilla*, whose coils of whirring calligraphy prove it sprang from the same impulse as the earlier picture, seems, by contrast, positively turbo-charged.

Sadly, Christensen's sudden death at the age of 64, which occurred not long after the opening of his retrospective, transformed it—at least in one sense—from a celebration to a memorial. But while the energy, invention and playfulness of the works on view underscored the poignancy of the loss, they also made Christensen vividly present. □

A survey of Dan Christensen's work was on view at Spanierman Modern, New York, from Jan. 9 to Feb. 17. Another retrospective, at LewAllen Contemporary, Santa Fe, ran from Mar. 2 to Apr. 25.

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Yellathrilla, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 36 by 90 inches.