

Dematerializing the Canvas

Recently, in a radical midcareer change, George Peck abandoned centralized composition and the rectangular support cloth, transforming his cut-up abstract paintings into ethereal, allusive and subtly tactile works.

BY JANET KOPLOS



Mirror Painting V, 1998, acrylic, graphite, polymer, silver, gold and watercolor on rice paper on nylon scrim, 79 by 48 1/2 inches.

Now that it's happened, the minimizing of the support cloth can be seen as the inevitable consequence of some small experimental works Peck made two years earlier with cheesecloth as the backing. Tacked to the wall, the cheesecloth was so misty and ethereal that the cuttings almost seemed to float on their own. Then, suddenly, they did: he began to trim the canvas to follow the contour of the cut-up painting. And then in the fall of 1997, arriving for a stint of guest-teaching in his native Budapest—which he fled, at the age of 15, during the Soviet crackdown that put an end to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956—he unexpectedly launched a new series, which he called "Networks."

The "Networks" title brings to mind the interlocking structure of cloth itself. One might also think of the interconnections by which the world functions and which brought Peck back to Budapest. These dramatically drawn out works—all arms and no body—make literal and physical the usually metaphoric extensions of abstract painting. They are openly evocative, calling up a host of associations and committing themselves to none: gnarled tree trunks and branches, fractured basalt, wind-tossed banners, insect legs, wisps of mist rising from damp woods, contour maps of islands. All these and more are suggested by these mottled shapes, their complex markings mostly beige and purplish brown or gray.

Shown in the main gallery, *Untitled (Network II)* and the related *Time Pc. I* and *III* (all 1998) are between 12 and 13 feet tall, as big as they could have been in this space, and as much as 15 feet wide. *Network II*, which fades almost to the ivory color of the wall at most of its 20 or so extremities, reaches out like an octopus to take over the wall. But it operates by stealth, not aggression, and com-

mands space with the lightest of touches. A few spreading spots of coppery green call attention to the color variations, richer than one realizes at first, and augment an impression that the work is a stain seeping into cracks in the plaster. (The "Time Pc." works are generally darker, and so stand out more sharply against a wall.)

The works read interestingly at every distance—as shapes when seen from across the room and as plays of intimate incidents when seen up close, where the brushstrokes can be discovered, along with overlapping layers of cloth and bits of glittery gold or silver pigment mixing with shiny passages of glue. The paintings are lyrical from both viewpoints. They're moody, mysterious, accumulative and alive in the near view, while the beauty of the cutting is best grasped from afar. It is another gesture entirely. Looking at the edges, one can easily imagine the quick flash of the knife. It is a means to an allover effect rather than graphic isolation, and thus closer to the fluidity of Pollock's drips (though probably more selected and controlled) than to Matisse's cutting.

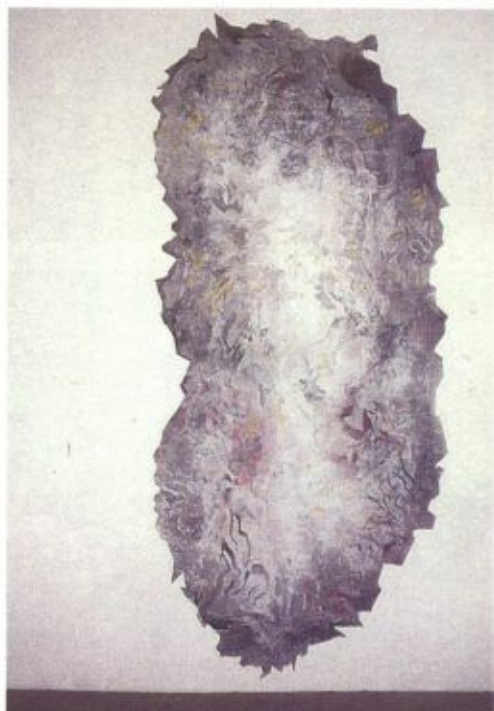
The large *Time Pc. I* has a climbing, aspiring organization because its most solid element is more or less vertical, with a strong extension at top left that forms a restless diagonal. *Time Pc. II*, relatively modest at 12 by 8 feet, has its largest mass at the top, in the form of a horizontal cloud. The rest of the piece drifts downward diagonally with dark extensions to the right that look like raspy bird legs.

The four pieces in the second gallery, from the small *For Adam* to the large *Mirror Painting IV*, are closer to Peck's previous works, with their stencils and frottage, their jagged shards, their icy channels of glistening glue amid a centralized mass. Peck has not exhausted those options yet. Unquestionably, *Mirror Painting IV* is strong enough to repel any attempt to call it transitional. Peck has allowed romance to creep into this work: whispers of tender color, areas of engorged pink and secret stashes of gold are hidden in the thicket

For Adam, 1998, acrylic, graphite, polymer, silver and watercolor on rice paper and nylon scrim, 23 by 20 inches.



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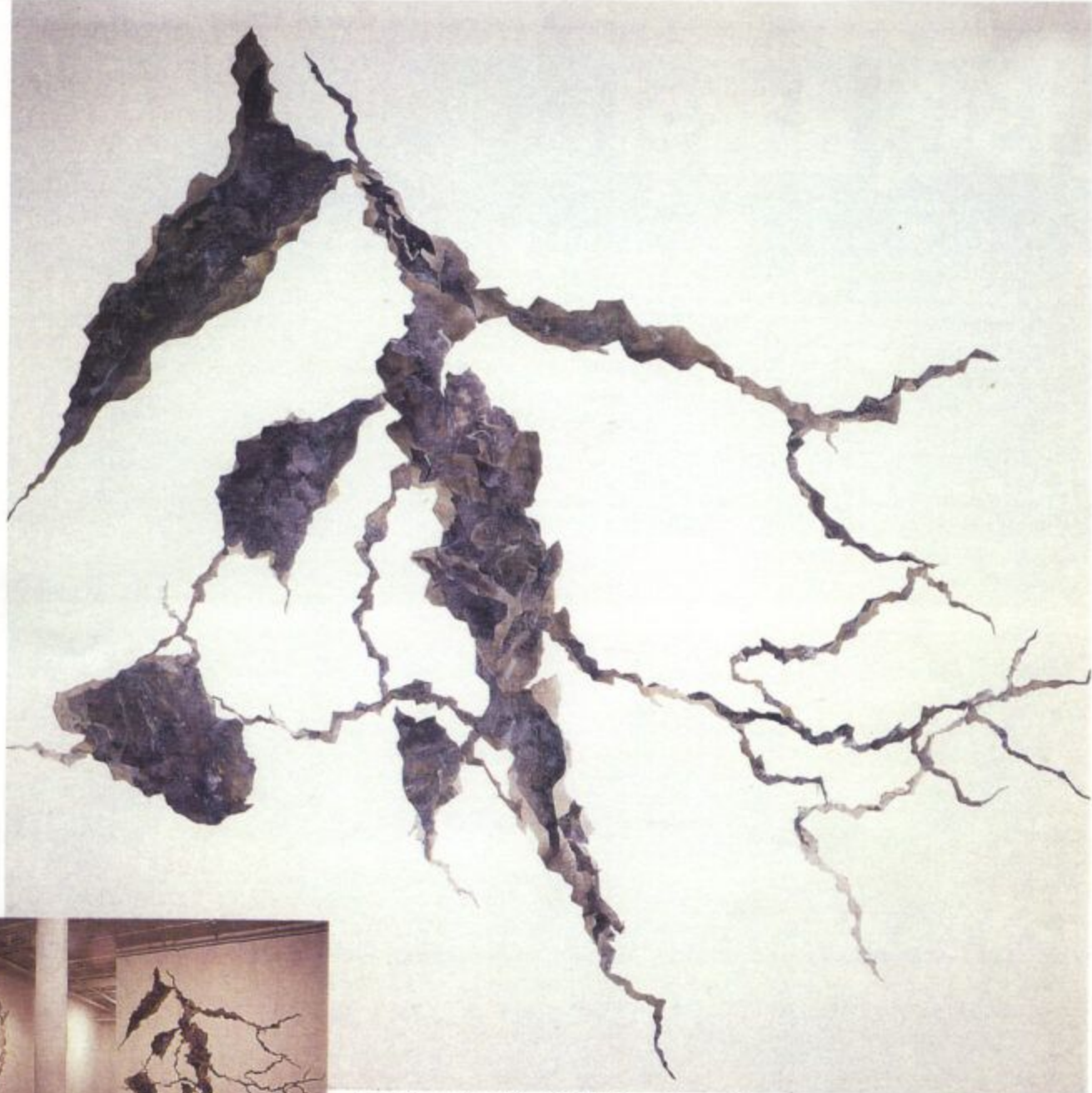


Mirror Painting IV, 1997, acrylic, graphite, polymer, silver, gold and watercolor on muslin on linen, 128 by 63 inches.

of cuts, stencil lines and graphite shadows. There is a foggy passage at the middle in which the cut pieces are both paler and farther apart, as if this "mirror" has shattered and is dispersing.

Peck's paintings fuse forceful action, sensitive touch, compulsive labor and wistful letting go. They achieve their own sort of emotional resolution in their lack of demand for resolution. Peck's abandonment of the ground and the center are moves as radical as his previous decision to cut up his canvases. It seems a young person's risk-taking, a throwing away of controls. One may wonder if it recapitulates his formative experiences of escaping, becoming self-sufficient, starting over. The works' almost baroque complexity and Peck's apparent comfort with slow, cumulative building of effects of line, color and texture display a new artistic maturity. □

"George Peck: Painting" was on view at Trans Hudson Gallery, New York (May 12-June 13, 1998); he will show again at that venue in October. He also showed new paintings at the Applied Arts Museum, Budapest (Dec. 11-18, 1997).



Above, George Peck: Time Pc. I, 1998, acrylic, graphite, polymer and silver on muslin on canvas, 155 1/2 by 121 1/2 inches. Inset, Untitled (Network II), left, and Time Pc. I, right, installed at Trans Hudson Gallery, New York. Photo John Lamka.

Opposite, Untitled (Network II), 1998, acrylic, graphite, polymer, silver and gold on muslin, rice paper on nylon scrim, 142 1/2 by 182 inches.

In George Peck's paintings, the brushstroke has become increasingly elusive and now seems more of a remembrance than a presence. In the '90s, the appearance of his work has been determined by cut lines rather than painted ones. Peck's unusual working method has been to paint an abstraction on unstretched muslin and then slice it up with a mat knife, rub the pieces with graphite over stencils of his own design, and rearrange them on unstretched canvas that is shiny with glue. He often paints a bit on the resulting surfaces, which may suggest maps, Chinese ink landscapes, the heavens or other images and atmospheres.

Over three decades, Peck's abstraction has ranged widely in style: once expressionist, now reticent; at

another time darkly solid, now fractured and light-filled; occasionally highly colored, now smoky and subtle. In all his recent work, Peck, 57, is notably attentive to the qualities of his support materials. He has applied his procedures to a variety of fabrics and papers, obtaining a like variety of effects. The weight and tightness of the fabric he paints on or glues to determine texture and transparency in the finished work. The cut-and-applied painting has typically remained a centralized mass on the support cloth, although it may be as open or closed as he chooses to make it during the intuitive process. It may suggest something as dense as a stone or as fragmentary as a land mass riddled with rivers, bays and ridges. Some works look like models of plate tec-

tonics. A few years ago, when he was keeping the cut-up painting roughly rectangular, the support cloth served as a frame for it; when he began to compose less regular shapes, the unstretched support cloth, hanging softly and sometimes unevenly, began to seem a more important part of a textile "object" or an overall allusive effect.

Peck's exhibition last May at Trans Hudson in New York's meatpacking district, his third solo with that gallery, came as a shock to those who know his work. Not only had the support cloth vanished as a rectangular setting for the cut-up painting, but the painting itself was no longer a centralized mass but had dissolved into attenuated arms stretching out across the wall in abandon.