

# Art in America

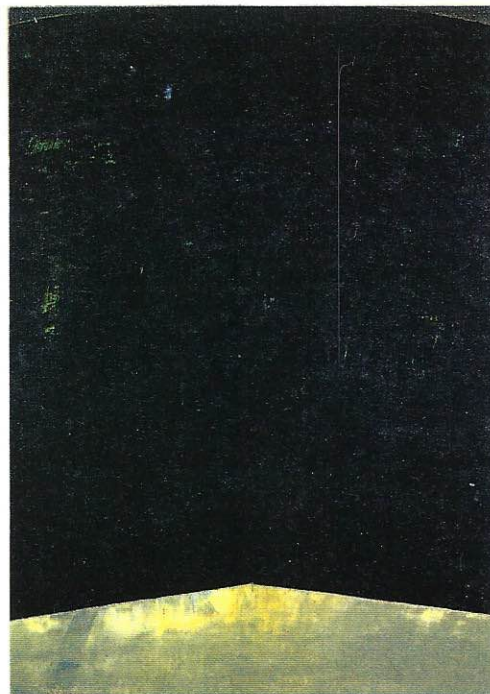
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## Martha Keller at Stephen Rosenberg

Over the last several years Martha Keller has been developing her own distinctive brand of post-Minimal abstract painting. Working with wax and oils, Keller has pursued a synthesis of expressionistic paint handling and reductivist geometrical composition. In her recent work this usually entails the positioning of a circular sweep or arc of color on a conventionally rectangular canvas, with a wide wedge often bitten out of the arcing shape. The source of this configuration is the baseball field, the wedge shape being the infield. Keller's translation of the baseball-field image into romantic abstract geometry seems peculiarly American. It may be our national identification with the sport that draws so many artists to it as a vehicle for themes of mortality and transcendence.

In her earlier paintings Keller often isolated the curved shape, making of it a sort of hieratic shield, and invoking the personal "emblems" of artists such as Newman, Gottlieb and Rothko. Keller's emblem, hovering within the confines of the canvas, was often exquisitely painted, yet it had a difficult time escaping associations with pie-wedge graphics and hand-held fans. Keller appears to have recognized this susceptibility; for she has since shouldered the

emblematic image out of the painting in favor of a more dynamic pictorial space.



Martha Keller: *Concealed Green*, 1987, oil, wax and graphite on canvas, 84 by 60 inches; at Stephen Rosenberg.

Keller's arc now fills the canvas, implying a spread beyond the frame. Her new format tends to further a landscape space; in keeping with this, her atmospheric color, enhanced by the matte sheen of the wax, suggests pictorial depth. Simultaneously the *body* of her built-up and scraped-down surfaces, along with her simple, though dynamic, compo-

sitions, returns one to a contemplation of the actual record of her plastic procedures.

In the painting *Concealed Green*, a field of bright, almost turquoise green peeks from behind a blue-black buildup of paint that comprises the dark curve just creasing the top of the canvas. A luminous yellow wedge rises from the bottom of the picture like a platform, but its waxy translucence also creates a sense of spatial depth. This progression from light to dark is reversed in *Luna di Miele*, a slightly squatter rectangular canvas with a similar composition. Here, the arcing shape is a deep, hazy goldenrod, the bottom wedge a sleek black violet shot through with metallic flickers of isolated reds and blues.

As with much of today's most moving reductivist painting, from Marden's to that of younger painters like David Reed, Nancy Haynes and Joseph Amar, Keller's works transcend the often mean esthetic of the "concrete" via the sensuality of her materials and a cultivation of a sense of space and light. This light may be the closest that modernist painting can come to depicting the undepictable.

—Stephen Westfall