

# The Washington Post

Nov 15, 2001

## Peter Halley Recharges His Cells

By Jessica Dawson

Painter Peter Halley lifted his visual vocabulary – large squares with bands issuing from them, which he called "cells" and "conduits" -- from old-school abstractionists like Mondrian and Albers, whose minimalist forms broke from the confines of figuration and representation in the first half of the 20th century. By Halley's reckoning, though, the same geometries that spelled freedom back then had, by the 1980s, added up to a prison sentence. Contemporary life, Halley argued, was lived in a series of claustrophobic boxes – our office towers, apartment blocks and parking lots.

So parroting an earlier, heroic vocabulary to show human interaction squeezed through impossibly narrow bands became Halley's conceit and a hallmark of the neo-Geo movement he symbolized. He painted dour squares with prison bars, or cells and conduits in hyper-bright colors, like Technicolor computer chips.

By the early '90s, Halley was working a foolproof formula. Although his palette got more upbeat (he added glossy metallics and pearlescent paints to his repertoire) and he started doing wall works, too, his paintings looked much the same as in the decade before. To shake things up, he stretched his cells into stout rectangles and had them sprout a few more conduits, as if upgrading them to Pentium chips.

Now, although another decade has passed, you could easily mistake Halley's four large canvases at Numark Gallery – three made this year, one last – for works from five, even 10 years ago. The ironic imitator of heroic abstraction now gleefully copies himself.

Why not, when they're such gorgeous pieces? One sunny painting could have just walked off a plane from Los Angeles: It's a utopian vision of shiny pale pink and green inflected with dark blue and black. Even improbable color juxtapositions, like the lavender, red and pink in "Emoticon," do no harm – instead they lend a jarring immediacy and seem to set his cells in motion.

But Halley's color play, smart as it is, would be nothing without his surfaces. If you drew a finger across any one – don't you wish you could – you'd encounter countless ridges and bumps, areas soft and rough or slick and fast. It's this tactile quality, and the longing it conjures, that makes Halley's paintings so desirable. Look at the two smooth-skinned silk screens also on view at Numark and you'll see what I mean: Without those succulent surfaces, there's no meat.

Halley achieves his varied textures using Roll-a-TEX, a paint additive that produces a nubby surface, or just layer upon layer of paint – as many as 50 of them are shored up in some of the bands.

Applying all those layers is a labor-intensive job, so Halley retains a team of assistants to construct his paintings for him, a process he likens to an old-fashioned workshop or an architecture firm. After he makes the sketches – messy things, with uneven applications of color that seem totally un-Halley, yet they're one of the few things done in his own hand – he gives them to his assistants. Those folks actually do almost all of the painting, because, as Halley notes, "the head architect doesn't do the door details."

He does insist on applying the Roll-a-TEX, though, because he figures those warty surfaces might reveal the artist's hand. Future Halley authenticators, take note...

...Peter Halley at Numark Gallery, 406 Seventh St. NW. Tuesday- Saturday 11 a.m.-6 p.m., to Dec. 22. 202-628-3810.

## NUMARK GALLERY

625-27 E Street NW Washington DC 20004  
T. 202.628.3810 F. 202.628.1925  
numarkgall@aol.com www.numarkgallery.com