

PRESS RELEASE

Richmond Burton
The I AM Paintings

Wednesday, April 25, 2001 – June 30, 2001

Opening reception, April 25th, 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.

A Few Remarks on Richmond Burton's I AM Paintings.
By Dominique Nahas

The eighteenth - century critic Jean Francois Marmontel described the thin line which separates the sublime from the ridiculous, as an essence which is often at the very limit of taste. It is the sensation that we feel only when we are confronted with the marvelous, with power and with grandeur, concepts that go beyond taste and imitation and even art itself. To associate this eighteenth century aesthetic category with Richmond Burton's new work is to de-associate it with the concept of the sublimity of particular images, to disenfranchise the I AM paintings from specific visual models. Instead the sublime becomes meaningful, in light of these near-mystic works, if we are to gather it close to the sublimity of the sentiments, an entirely different model which removes it from the rhetoric of nobility. Through the later interpretation we feel the effective capacity of the sublime to move the emotions and strike the imagination. Touching on the borderline aspect of the sublime and its potential to stumble into bombast is a way of referring to the risks which Burton is prepared to take for his art, just as introducing the I AM paintings by way of the sublime is a way of announcing Burton's full acknowledgement of the politically subversive (and revolutionary) capacity of sensuousness itself.

If we keep in mind the force and fluidity of Burton's work as a whole Denis Diderot's comment that enthusiasm is the indispensable quality needed for the sublime to exist seems accurate. The sublime's capacity to enrapture as well as to terrify the soul makes it an effective, if often overused and therefore unpersuasive emotional carrier. Yet it would be a mistake to take the evident enthusiasm in Burton's work as simple optimism on the artist's part. Instead a revolutionary character in his work comes through in its insinuation of a perpetually renewed estrangement from social repression, a tension that is an integral part of the work's political resonance. Not surprisingly Burton's paintings refuse to settle down. They may be sublime they may be ridiculous but they aren't polite. Instead, they are visually witty, even perverse, in their pratfalling mutability.

At a public talk at Pratt Institute late last year Richmond Burton introduced his work by proposing it was engaged in new and surprising radicality, that of overt and all-encompassing sensuality. "I AM (Androgynous)", the artist writes in his notes, "...expresses my fascination with sexuality and my conviction that the next revolution will be a sexual one... which will blur the distinctions between male and female, gay and straight... [which will] ultimately resolve the differences between sexual categorization." This theme, of blurring of all distinctions, of blending and integrating, lies at the core of the passion of the work. It is also at the heart of the works' subversive beauty. When I was asked whether I'd be open to write some ad hoc comments on Richmond Burton's newest series of paintings there was no hesitation on my part. Burton's I AM paintings are the easiest paintings to reflect on because they are sustained pleasures for this viewer. With their alternation between astounding lyricism and animal-like vitality, the artists' hybrid paintings are the result of an audacity to confront and shatter all proscriptive

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norms of how abstract paintings should "be". They are all and one and none of the following : geometric yet naturalistic, erotic and incoherent yet rational, all-over and dispersed, immanent and transcendent, formal, decorative as well as symbolic Eastern and Western, conceptualized yet vitally expressionistic. These new paintings are Whitmanesque in the sense that they undermine all expectations through their seemingly effortless filigreeing of space and their uncontrived musical grace and nuanced physicality. Their fluidity speaks of a Burtonian "body electric", an idealized polis, which, as Whitman's vision expounded in *Song of Myself*, finds itself through the act of shedding false consciousness through an awakening to one's essence. However we may want to interpret the I AM paintings, one thing remains certain: they are all emanating from a singularly intense vision.

Burton refers to the I AM paintings in his notes as "... the skins, that I shed along the continuous process of change and movement" and that his work is the direct result both "...of the desire to go beyond polarity and duality..." and a desire to "...experience harmony as the resolution of the irreconcilable..." When I read these notes and others and saw the results of the artist's ambitions I was moved and touched on so many levels that I hardly knew where to begin. Firstly, I am drawn to Burton's work because it is truly the residue of his effort to attain what Herbert Marcuse once termed the goal of great art: "the attainment of a radicalized consciousness" whose subversive power rests in its acceptance and indeed the exploitation of contradictions. Burton takes the risk of seeming ridiculous, of being seen the Fool. He wants everything. He wants nothing. He wants all-inclusiveness. He wants art to defy categories. One could, for example easily say that his works participate in the immanent tradition of abstraction while eschewing the cruel taciturnity associated with geometrically organized painting, which is so often so austere puritanical, so self-flatteringly "pure". Burton uses geometry, of course. He uses the grid as a starting off point. But he slowly implodes it to suggest upheaval and instability by greater forces. Similarly one could level the claim that Burton's work properly rejoices and revels in the liminal associations inherent in embellishments or ornamentation. He obscures distinctions between symbolic and decorative, between abstract and naturalistic, as his configurations of geometrical elements merge into the semblance of plants, animals, sexual organs or seed-pods. Other associations swirl about the work; art-nouveau geometricized mosaic motifs drawn from Burton's study of Oriental art as well of natural formations, leaves and sea shells and rocks. But here too the associations seem to cling lightly then fade away: intimations of Matta and Masson are felt, just as easily as Inuit designs begin to appear followed by psychedelic posters of the sixties superimposed by their Alphonse Mucha/Art Nouveau provenance. Yet again these initial notations are subsumed by Islamic notations, cuerda seca tiles from the Near East, ancient Roman mosaic glass, Chinese calligraphy, and then to a pan-cultural morphology of cosmic sperm painters, American Indian space painters, Persian carpets and on and on. The subject matter isn't about specifics its about transmutation and transformation --- a kaleidoscopic potentiality. Taken as a whole Burton's work is a manifestation of his desire to meld the sublime within the engorged sensuality that permeates his work. We associate the concept of sublimity (even a late-modernism version if it) with expression, genius and nature --- not with conventions of art-making or the practitioners of styles, but with an energy burns through those frameworks altogether. Finally, it is the carnivalesque dare-devil quality to Richmond Burton's work which draws us to it, to its commitment to the decolonized mind and to freedom of expression. This artistic autonomy, unhindered by any concern of political correctness is what gives Burton's I AM series of paintings its revolutionary potential. This sense of play demonstrates that Richmond Burton is aware that seriousness itself could be in question in the new century and that he intends to hold up his end of the bargain.

Dominique Nahas is an independent critic and curator based in Manhattan.

The current exhibition [William Eggleston: Recent Works](#) remains on view through April 21st, 2001.

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