

Art in America

PAUL LAFFOLEY

Kent Fine Art

“Paul Laffoley: The Force Structure of the Mystical Experience,” a survey of the visionary artist and architect’s paintings and sculptures, portrayed the breadth of Laffoley’s interests. For the past five decades, Laffoley has created dense compositions that bring together a range of intellectual, spiritual and artistic references. The best works go beyond being merely visually impressive thought-maps to serve as reflections on social and epistemological structures.

During the 1960s, Laffoley was among a team of people hired by Andy Warhol to scour TV around the clock (Laffoley got the graveyard shift), and many of his works demonstrate an infusion of Pop strategies with late-’60s psychedelia. In the painting *Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?* (1964), a yin-yang symbol appears amid a composition suggesting a self-help board game. The viewer is affronted with bold textual imperatives like “REMEMBER YOURSELF” and “DO NOT EXPRESS UNPLEASANTNESS.”

A circular track of color blocks surrounding the yin-yang symbol contains the musical-scale syllables “DO, RE, MI, FA, SOL, LA, SI,” which combine with the forceful declarations to make for a rigid model of experience—one that implores the viewer to act in prescribed ways, at certain “itches,” and that contrasts with the usual representation of yin-yang balance.

The painting *Myth of the Zeitgeist* (2013) elaborately details and juxtaposes terms of philosophy and history across a series of geometric shapes and symbols. Binary terms—“APOLLO” and “DIONYSUS,” “REASON” and “NECESSITY,” “REVOLT” and “HOLD BACK”—oppose each other throughout, comprising a portrayal of dialectical impotence in which there appears to be no suggestion of progress. The hexagram at the center of the work resembles a Star of David, especially when viewed against the swastikas in the painting’s four corners, which naturally evoke thoughts of Nazism even though the symbols are oriented in the Buddhist and Hindu manner, with their bottom edges parallel to the ground. “HISTORY: IT IS ALL BAD, ALL OF IT, BUT SOME DAY IN THE FUTURE IT COULD BE HORRENDOUS” is written toward the top of the composition, above the apparent label for the piece: “ALL THE CLASSICAL WELTANSCHAUUNGEN.”

Some of the more understated moments of the show were the personal ones. In the mixed-medium sculpture *The Meditron* (1985), Laffoley memorializes his deceased mother through photographs and emblems from her life gathered in a cabinet-like display—a device through which he claims to be

able to communicate with her. The simply presented collection of items calls to mind a shoebox full of mementos from a loved one. Laffoley’s painting *Homage to Kiesler* (1968) presents a portrait of the Austrian-American architect, artist and theorist Frederick Kiesler resting within a mandala. The work is both a shrine to the unconventional intellectual and a fond depiction of someone of great personal importance to Laffoley, who apprenticed with Kiesler for a year after being dismissed from an architecture program at Harvard in the early ’60s.

While visitors to this show could delight in Laffoley’s individual works, the presentation as a whole relied on the eccentric qualities of the art and the artist to make for a compelling experience. A more thorough investigation of one or two facets of his practice—particularly given the complexity of the compositions themselves—might have more convincingly revealed the depth of his artistic project.

—Max Rosenberg



Paul Laffoley:
*Why Is There
Something Rather
Than Nothing?*,
1964, oil, acrylic,
hand-applied vinyl
letters and mixed
mediums on canvas,
52 by 48 inches;
at Kent Fine Art.

