

The Big '80s

Against a cultural backdrop of fun, affluence and quirky fashion trends, painters of the 1980s made a splash.

by Candice Russell

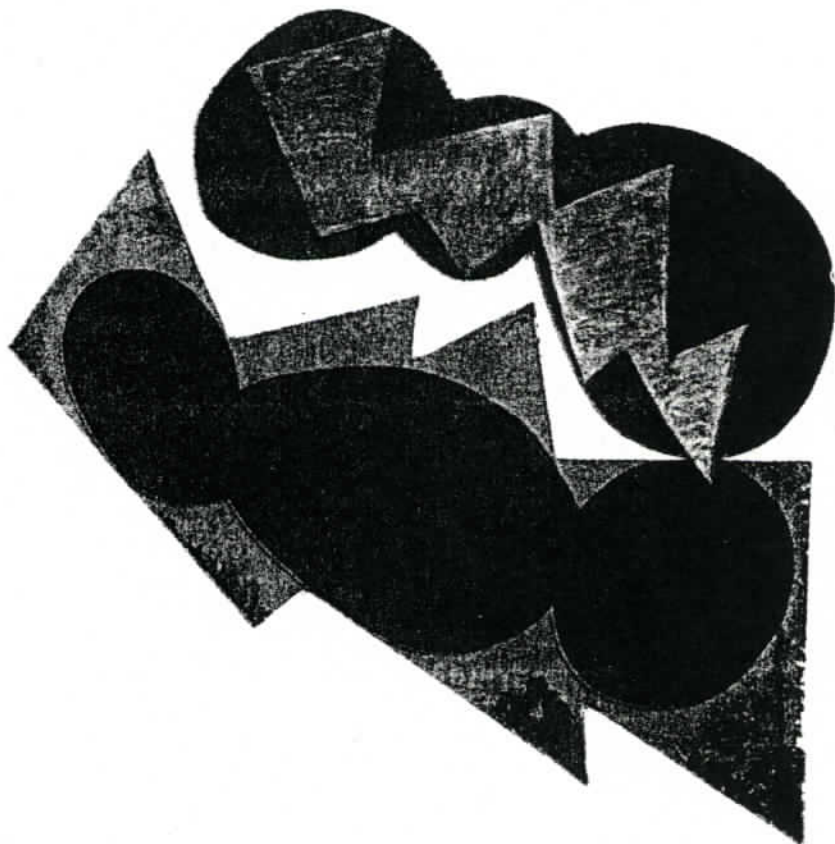
Small, meticulously crafted works are in scant supply in *Mythic Proportions: Painting in the 1980s*, through May 13 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami. Instead, there is plenty of the opposite. Big, splashy, often angst-ridden canvases were the rage in the '80s. Museum director Bonnie Clearwater, who is also the show's curator, brings perspective to a time when artists in different cities and countries were on the same aesthetic page.

Art tastemakers in New York City considered painting dead in the late 1970s until Julian Schnabel came along. Photography and videography were alive and humming, while the tired old canvas got a jolt from Schnabel, who had his second solo show at the Mary Boone Gallery in 1979. His emergence was "a crystallizing moment in contemporary art history," writes Clearwater in a wall text, adding that his "images break up and dissolve into abstraction over the cracked crockery that encrusts his paintings." The artist turned filmmaker (he directed *Before Night Falls* and *Basquiat*) is represented by three enormous and messy mixed-media paintings with real bits of china splashed with plumb-ugly paint, including "Divan" (1978), "800 Blows" (1983) and "The Walk Home" (1984-'85).

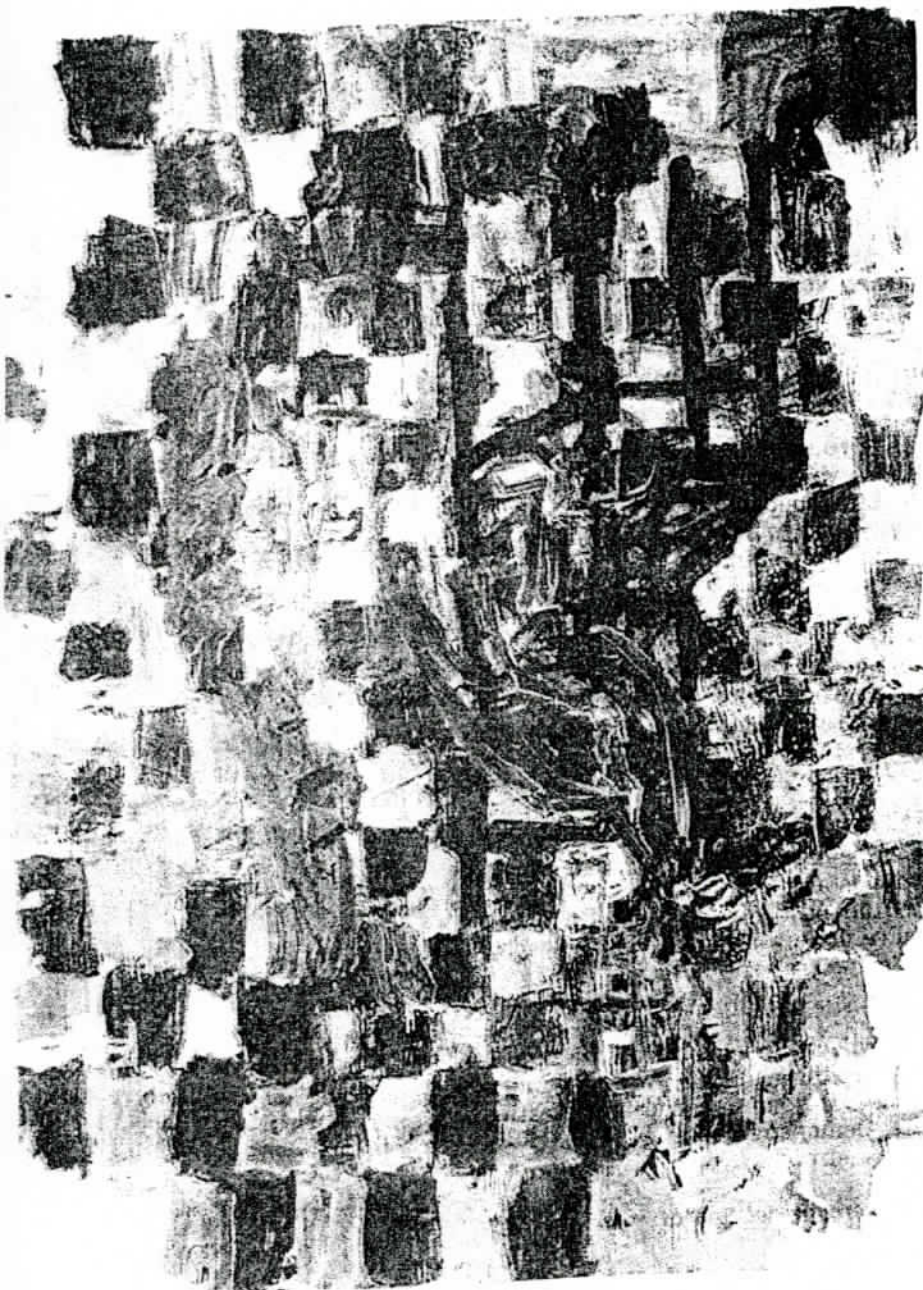
Sherrie Levine's trio of striped wood chair seats doesn't have the feminist thrust of her watercolors done in the style of famous male artists. Her point in "After Piet Mondrian," "After Stuart Davis" and "After Joan Miró" is that they have an easier time in the art world than women. The pieces show her technical facility, even as they bring up the discomfiting question of art forgery.

Searching for a universal language, German artist Georg Baselitz chose his own version of abstraction. He upended conventional notions of the human form in "Letztes Selbstbildnis (Munich)" (1982), an oil on canvas with a man standing on his head.

The pictogram quality of George Condo's "Dancing to Miles" (1985-'86), with its small gold and brown figures, gives it a jazzy rhythm.



Heart and Mind
Elizabeth Murray, oil on
canvas, 111 3/4 x 114"



Die Wildnis im
Zimmer
Georg Baselitz,
oil on canvas,
98 1/2" x 78 3/4"

Cont
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Prior to introducing artist David Salle, who spoke recently at North Miami City Hall next to the museum, Clearwater said she did the show because of him. The subject of two major retrospectives last year, Salle "pushes the whole idea of intentionality," according to Clearwater.

Salle's oil and acrylic "Byron's Reference to Wellington" (1987) seems to be three paintings, including a still life of dead fish, a 17th-century genre scene and a present-day portrait of a young woman. In his speech, Salle said he's interested in "the coming together of two or more unlike things."

Eric Fischl is motivated by Freudian psychology in paintings that echo photography. "His emphasis is not on technique and detail but on the creation of a scene that would implicate the viewer as an accomplice," Clearwater writes. There's a voyeuristic quality to "Haircut" (1986), an oil on linen in which a nude woman sits on her bathroom floor. The aftermath of a collision between a bicycle and a station wagon is disturbingly portrayed in "A Woman Possessed" (1981), with the unconscious victim being rushed by six dogs.

Street life, discos and graffiti spawned another group of artists whose paintings have their roots in other things. Keith Haring's jittery, amusing figures and faces take their cue from the simplistic lines of cartoons. Jean-Michel Basquiat, who like Haring built a reputation by defacing New York City walls and subways with his art, honors Southern folk art in "Mississippi" (1982), an acrylic and oil stick on canvas. Kenny Scharf re-creates the *Jetsons* show he did at New York City's Fun Gallery in 1981, inspired by the futuristic cartoon characters. All three artists' work is easier to read than many others on view.

Case in point is "Tracer" (1984), an oil on canvas by Terry Winters, who is fascinated by the unpredictability of the chaos theory. Spiky amoebas in brown and gray move amid a dripping, drab backdrop. Ross Bleckner's optical paintings made from layers of glazes and pigments, portray nature "The Forest" (1981), an oil and wax on canvas, is a series of vertical stripes in black and various shades of green. Proving that beauty is passé are the mixed-media, lavalike painting of Anselm Kiefer.

Seeming to mock the compulsion of museums and galleries is "Collection of 480 Plaster Surrogates" (1982-'89), enamel on cast hydrostone by Allan McCollum. Small, black-centered framed paintings line one wall in a rebellious gesture to the need to create, display, oggle and sell art. It's the most humorous piece in this cutting-edge show.