

HEATHER HUTCHISON

WHITE FACE • OFFERING FOR JIZO, 1995 • BEESWAX, PIGMENT, PLEXIGLAS, BIRCH
80% X 47% X 4% (204.5 X 120.6 X 10.8 CM)
COLLECTION OF MARIANNE BOESKY; COURTESY OF NOHRA HAIME GALLERY, NEW YORK

At first glance elegantly reductive, simply organized with a minimalist sense of purity, Heather Hutchison's pieces are actually more Dantesque in implication. With subtle and intelligent intuition, the artist plays a medley of aesthetic correspondences. These ephemeral pieces at once convey a wistful, Turneresque ethereality, the diffuse haziness of Rothko, or the vaporous turbulence at the meeting of sea and sky in Courbet's landscapes.

A delicate deliberation between careful crafting and provocative invention sustains a singular tension in Hutchison's painting. Built over wooden box frames that protrude several inches from the wall, painted with wax over Plexiglas, often giving off vague scents of lavender or other essential oils, these undeniably attractive diaphanous layers seem to form a link between painting and sculpture. In addition to their hybrid conceptual intelligence, Hutchison's pieces favor an expressive sensuality which enriches the life of painting as a more diffuse communiqué of intents. Quite unlike the immediacy, flatness and sublimation of aesthetic experience embraced by Clement Greenberg, or the existential concreteness of Abstract Expressionism, a baroque mutability creates a shimmering surface which imparts a feeling that Hutchison's art is never full, pure, or self-satisfied.

Hutchison's paintings proceed through all five phases enacted by Greek theater: a basic fact (reductivism), an accident, (the effervescence of the surface), an outcome (the tension between aesthetic categories), then a surprise, (the implication of our gaze), and a concluding action, which in this case is the dramatic transformation of a reductive type of abstraction. United in a kind of radiant perception of matter, amassed, condensed and aglow, both *MONUMENT* and *OFFERING FOR JIZO* unfold scenically, as if mounted on a stage. Discreetly nuanced and

divided into a diptych format, their visual theatricality does not claim exhaustiveness or definitiveness. Each visual movement or act seems to initiate another: ethereality gives way to density, brush strokes crisscross into a vague grid, only to be casually interrupted by sudden twirling patterns. Visual plays, the clash between moments of singular opaqueness and a sudden translucence, and the surprising presence of smell combine to make Hutchison's paintings dramatic sites thirsting for communication.

The dynamic artifice of these staged surfaces makes us aware of peculiarities that seem to appear just because of us. In what amounts to an internal overthrow, the silence of abstraction as an enclosed aesthetic entity is disturbed through fleeting glimpses of visual division that overrun the self-referential borders of painting. And so, we are led into an elusive, vaporous space where existence, time, emotion, and memory mingle in a flash of meditative, faintly vertiginous reflection.

Our gaze has no privileged or natural access, only fleeting opportunities that may be seized, in Blake's words, "to catch the joy as it flies." The frustrating independence of these impressionistically shifting surfaces breaks away from the formalist postulates of reductivism in favor of a poetic sensibility that does not set rules as to how it should be read or viewed. Vibrant with luxuriously brilliant markings, these are, however, not the surfaces of narcissistic self-reflection, free of obligations. The murmuring diction of suspenseful nuances in Hutchison's painting moves away from the aesthetically secure, overall Minimalist grid to a more drastic, sporadic horizon that runs the gamut from abstract interiority and reductivism to subjective exteriority and the subject. These are elusive sites for painting, inner landscapes as slippery as their wax surfaces. They recall the words of Flannery O'Connor: "Where you thought you were going to was never there, and where you are is no good unless you get away from it." Never whole, always mercurial and located in an ambivalent emergence, Hutchison's penetrating and deeply felt paintings paradoxically communicate a subtle note of peril.

MAIA DAMIANOVIC

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HEATHER HUTCHISON

Jamison Thomas

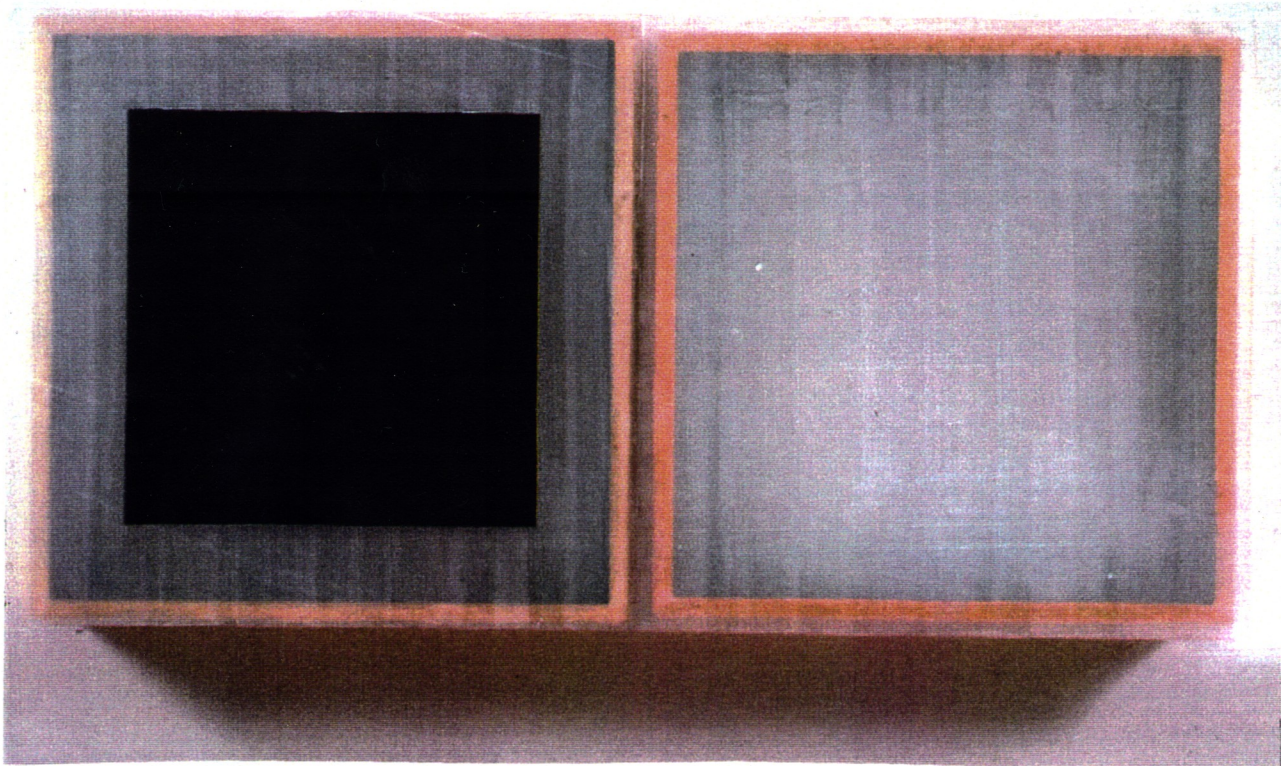
The ambiguous legacy of Minimalism—its apparently contradictory emphasis on the unadorned properties of material and an almost spiritual purity—continues to engage new generations of artists. Heather Hutchison, a young artist who made her solo debut here, exploits this contradiction, creating work that suggests at times Albers dematerialized, Noland etched on water, or a marriage of Robert Irwin and Frank Stella.

Working with square sheets of Plexiglas coated with thin layers of beeswax and, less frequently, concrete or Masonite, Hutchison plays opacity against translucence, flatness against a subtle perception of depth, matter against light. Laid over wood-box frames that protrude several inches from the wall, Plexiglas squares serve as a canvas for variously thick layers of beeswax. Hutchison may place two square boxes side by side,

one lightly coated so that its surface has a watery bluish tint, while the surface of the other resembles tar (an effect produced by mixing graphite into a thick layer of wax). In other works, slightly different thicknesses of wax create a white-on-white effect, manifesting itself as a square within a square or, in one case, an almost imperceptible target composition. In some of her latest works, Hutchison plays icily iridescent squares against squares covered with butter-textured layers of opaque concrete or Masonite.

In Hutchison's work, Minimalist reduction serves not to suppress metaphor and association but to enhance it. The basic geometry of the compositions sets off the evocative quality of the materials, which bring to mind such natural elements as light, water, ice, tar, and earth. These associations are encouraged by such titles as *Eclipse* or *Haze*. Following the lead of Eva Hesse or Christopher Wilmarth, Hutchison demonstrates that Minimalism and metaphor do not make such an odd couple after all.—E. H.

ELEANOR HEARTNEY, p. 168



Heather Hutchison, *Eclipse*, 1990, mixed media, 24¼ by 48½ by 3¾ inches. Jamison Thomas.