

## CONVERSATIONS



FRANK PROVENZANO

### Gallery offers hopeful response to terminal question

A couple of months ago, a popular art journal asked provocatively: "Is painting dead?" That's a question that gets asked repeatedly about other art forms, too. Is the novel dead? Is there a future for figurative sculpture? Can theater survive in the television age?

Rather than seeing transitions as a necessary phase of everything living, some cynics see morbidity in every change.

Ever since photographs began to replicate the material world in the 19th century, the question arose about the inevitable demise of painting.

A direct response to the terminal question about the future of painting can be found in a modest yet significant exhibit at the Susanne Hilberry Gallery in Birmingham.

The watercolors of Malcolm Morley and Ellen Phelan along with the panoramic oil paintings of Rackstraw Downes proves there's new territory to be found in one of the oldest and most resilient art forms.

Morley, Phelan and Downes are distinctively different artists. Collectively, they do not reflect a "movement."

On the contrary, their work demonstrates the diverse results when artists pick up a brush and begin to arrange pigmentation.

Painting dead? Read on.

### Familiar sights, dissimilar styles

Although dissimilar in tone, the subjects in the paintings are inspired by familiar visions: Morley's surrealistic seascapes, Phelan's still life and Downes' urban settings of playgrounds, highways, endless electrical lines and smokestacks.

Of the three artists, Phelan's work may have the most sustaining power. Not because she demonstrates greater proficiency, but because there's a challenging relevance to her work.

Phelan's watercolors not only push the envelope of the medium, but offer layers of subtle color registration and shapes that demand the viewer's scrutiny in order to uncover familiar forms. Phelan, a native Detroit, studied painting at Wayne State in the 1960s, and was an acclaimed member of the Casa Corridor group of artists before moving to New York in the early 1970s.

Beginning with realistic renderings of commonplace subjects, such as peonies, vases and oak trees, Phelan somehow flattens and blends the colors at a critical point before the paint dries.

The effect is a haunting image both blending and emerging from a background. This isn't mere trickery or mindless innovation.

With ethereal simplicity, she constructs a shadowy idyllic landscape that is both accessible and ambiguous. That contradictory appeal is what Camus explained as the ability to recapture the image in whose presence the soul first opened.

At a glance, Phelan's watercolors appear to be either a photographic blurring of time and motion, or a

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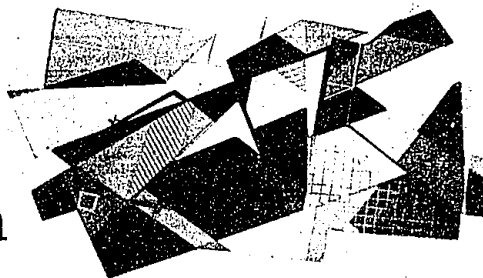
Vivid entry: Malcolm Morley's watercolor, "Hotel Webster."



STAFF PHOTO BY BRIAN MITCHELL

Colorful vision: Harold Linton of Farmington Hills, an internationally renowned colorist, seeks to increase awareness of how the application of color can enhance perception.

## Artist colors our world with many hues



Engaging: Linton's fine art paintings, such as "Out in the Light," are distinguished by highly animated color schemes.

BY FRANK PROVENZANO  
STAFF WRITER

The natural light in Harold Linton's Farmington Hills studio streams through the skylights and into a monochromatic work space.

There's no semblance of a trendy avocado hue or warm harvest gold. Just a few soft blue and violet splashes from a series of abstract watercolor paintings tacked to a white wall.

For a painter and color theorist whose advice on color schemes is sought internationally by architects and designers, Linton's studio is conspicuously without much pigmentation.

Similar to his decisively Piet Mondrian-like abstract paintings, Linton's neatly organized studio reflects a disciplined approach to illuminating a somewhat obscure field of study — color design.

Blessed with equal parts fine artist and methodical academician, Linton has both an aesthetic sensibility and practical explanation about those stimuli that make the optic nerve throb with pleasure.

"My goal is to define (the application of color) as a profession," said Linton, chair of the Department of Art and Design at Lawrence Tech University in Southfield. "I'm trying to build awareness of color and how it relates to perception and optical art."

For the last 15 years, Linton has written and published extensively — arguably, more than anyone — about the effect of color relationships on retail, design and architecture.

As proven by da Vinci, Rembrandt, Velazquez, Van Dyck and later by the Impressionists, capturing the subtleties of light illuminates and enhances the essence of a subject.

Linton puts it more directly: "Color is the subtext of life."

### As the wheel turns

After his presentation at the first international conference on color education three years ago, Linton was invited to establish the first master's degree program for colorists in Europe at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki. Last year, Linton spent on sabbatical in Finland to initiate the program.

Besides teaching at Lawrence Tech, he's currently finishing his eighth book, "Color in Architecture: Design Methods for Buildings, Interiors and Urban Space," to be published next year by McGraw Hill.

Linton's other books include color forecasting for the design industry, a survey of color design in marketing and the use of color in three-dimensional design.

From computer-generated color schemes, to new palettes being created by the European fashion industry, Linton justifies and forecasts the colors used by marketers, interior designers, architects, graphic designers and product designers.

Hardly coincidental, the increased fascination over the last 40 years with color design emerged along with abstract painting, advertising and niche marketing.

"We're more sophisticated," said Linton. "To get our attention, more complicated hues and nuances of color have been created. You see it in automobile systems from year to year."

The breakthrough research on

the subject can be found in Josef Albers' 1960 classic, "Interaction of Color."

Albers is credited as laying a visual framework for color design, according to Linton. Investigating how light affects the perception of seeing, Albers examined the effects triggered by optical elements.

Until Albers, the field of color theory was largely shaped by da Vinci's proclamation there were only six simple colors, and Sir Isaac Newton's notion of seven hues corresponding with the tones in the harmonic scale.

To some, color theorizing may seem superficial, but the proper color design can lead to significant breakthroughs.

For instance, by changing the color scheme in industrial environments in post World War II factories, one of the first color gurus, Faber Birren, helped to reduce accident rates while increasing productivity.

Nancy Kwalick, chair of the division of interior design at the University of Texas, has contributed to changes in office-interior design.

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## MUSIC

### Israel Philharmonic is heart of nation's culture

BY HUGH GALLAGHER  
STAFF WRITER

For violist Yuri Gandelman it was an easy decision to leave his native Russia and emigrate to Israel in 1990.

"When I emigrated I was a principal with the Moscow Chamber Orchestra. But Israel is the country of my family. I think I have to live here," he said. "And the orchestra is so wonderful."

The "orchestra" is the Israel Philharmonic, which brings its January tour of the United States to Ann Arbor's Hill Auditorium Jan. 10 under the direction of Zubin Mehta. It is part of the University Musical Society series.

Gandelman is one of a long line of Russian emigres

to take positions in the IPO.

"This is one of the biggest parts of the orchestra, something like 30 percent," said Gandelman by phone from his home in Tel Aviv. "Some people came in the '70s, some in the '80s and some in the '90s, really three generations. There are a lot of good musicians who have achieved important positions, first chair positions."

The IPO began as the Palestine Orchestra in 1936, 12 years before Israel became a nation.

Arturo Toscanini led the first concert of an orchestra composed of first chair musicians from Germany and Eastern Europe, who had fled their positions due to Nazism.

Please see PHILHARMONIC, D2



Dedicated maestro: Zubin Mehta has led the Israel Philharmonic through some of the most turbulent history of recent times.

JACOB AVDEYAN