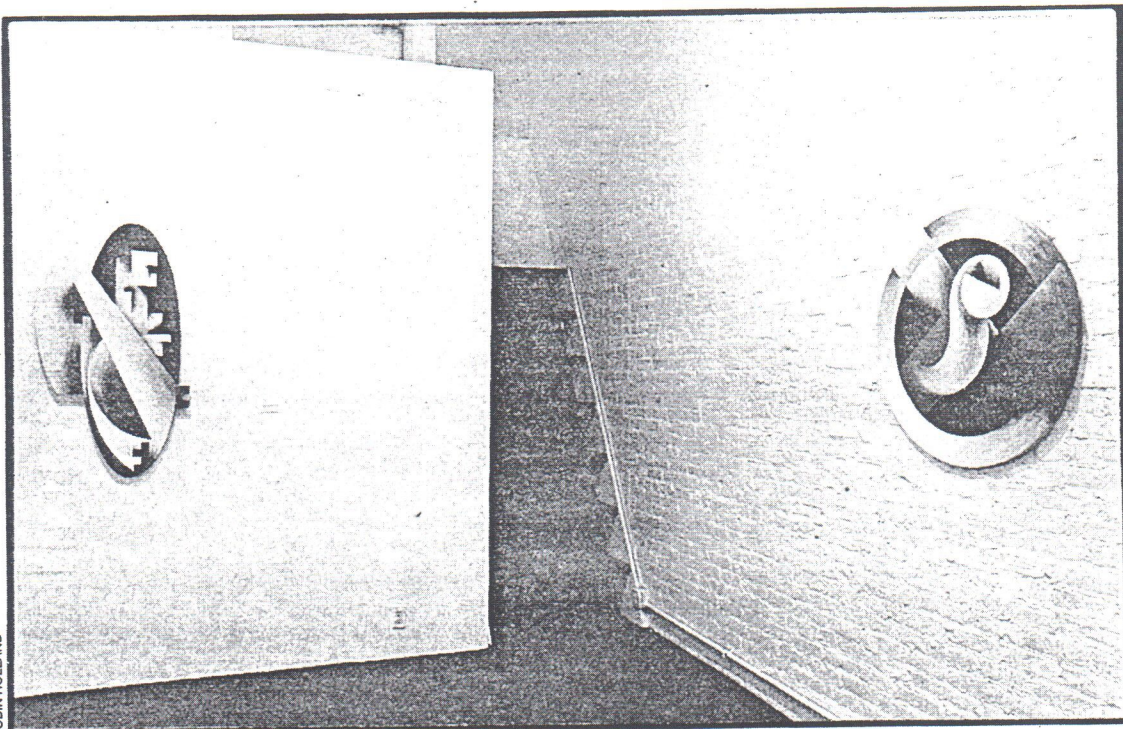


Marilyn Lerner: from left,  
*Whistling for the Wind* (1986)  
and *Circle Dancer* (1986)



# Chronicle in Black & White

BY GARY INDIANA

Today there were people screaming at each other in the street outside the office. A van had plowed into a cab. There was a mother with a baby in the cab and I guess the father was the one screaming at the driver of the van. I took a walk. I saw a girl I know punching a tall guy, maybe her boyfriend. Her boyfriend had a rolled-up newspaper and every now and then he slapped her with it. Yesterday was St. Patrick's Day. I went uptown to see **Christopher Wool's** paintings at Lühring, Augustine and Hodes (41 East 57th Street, through April 4).

These paintings are panel-sized, white on black; some look like millions of dripped dots and others look like wallpaper. The drippy ones have strangely regular surfaces, like cell clusters under a microscope or stars on a very clear night in the country. The enamel paint makes a glossy flatness against the metal ground. The wallpaper pictures have monotonous leaf and flower patterns interrupted by glitches of white paint. These were made with a special roller that slum landlords use to make hallways look wallpapered. You just put color on and roll it across. So these paintings, using only black and white, are like bleached-out walls in some

severely depressed neighborhood. Samples of etiolated interiors. Then there's a gleaming all-black painting that catches flecks of light when you move in front of it.

I felt slightly dizzy looking at these things close up. They offer nothing to hold on to, yet they're full, like a noise penetrating your brain and driving out your thoughts. Because of the metallic surfaces they have the physical aura of machinery or architecture. They echo the surfaces that ribbon past from a taxi or a subway window, the smooth glass and polished steel of the city world—but more condensed, pressurized into a heavy portable object. Their decorative qualities are deceptions. The eye doesn't linger in one place or rove over them registering choice bits, but locks into contact with the surface and freezes into a numbed stare. They exercise an almost hideous power, like real mirrors of existence. Perhaps they are Zen objects, surfaces that absorb the spectator into nothingness, enamel rock gardens without rocks.

In the streets, many people were wearing green. An acidic green, louder than the red of a clown's nose. Some wore green pants. Others had green hats, or

green carnations in their lapels. A man selling green balloons wore a button that said *KISS ME, I'M IRISH*. I went downtown and hid from all this Irishness at a matinee of *Angel Heart*, then saw **Marilyn Lerner's** show at John Good Gallery (39 Great Jones Street, through April 4).

It's strange to find your taste accommodating things for reasons you don't understand. I know why I like some of Christopher Wool's paintings, but I don't know why I like *Angel Heart* or Marilyn

## ART

Lerner's work. On what's probably the negative side, Lerner's paintings have an historicist rectitude, a polished self-control that's the astuteness of a disciplined painter: no highwire leaps or calculated badness, just virtuosity. Which one mistrusts, perhaps, for good reasons. You can look at these pictures and see Popova and Lissitzky and Elizabeth Murray, and feel a fairly tight schematic enclosing Lerner's activity. The lyricism of the titles—*Stargazer*, *Azimuth Circles*, *Floating Garden*, *Spirit Catcher*—shows a traditional abstractionist's hermeticism.

The juggling of curves, whorls, and rectangular swatches on canvases shaped like targets and surfboards, with thickly impastoed surface areas, poses and resolves familiar formal puzzles.

But given the formal limits Lerner has set herself, it's surprising how *unlike* other things her paintings seem to be, after the first wave of associations recedes. The spatial tricks accomplished with sweeping gradations of black-to-white, the radical balancing of fractured volumes, the intricate black-and-white reductions of Constructivism's full palette: painterly numbers, yes, but difficult; well-considered ones. They have a brittle sort of poetry, like Christopher Lucas's increasingly weird paintings on warped wood. I confess, though, that none of the above is what I like about these pictures; this is only a language ready-made to describe them. I came out of the movies and walked into a gallery without a thought in my head except "avoid McSorley's on your way home." This is the story of that sort of day. *Angel Heart* is the kind of movie I hardly ever enjoy and these are the kind of paintings I often blank out in front of. They surprised me. Being surprised in New York is almost never pleasant, but this was. ■