

## Art in America

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### Helmut Federle at Peter Blum - New York

Stephen Talasnik

Helmut Federle's recent exhibition of drawings dating from 1969 to 2001 illustrated the difference between persistence and predictability. Federle has explored graphic simplicity in representation and, even more, in abstraction, with a continuously creative reiteration. Known primarily for his geometric yet subtly gestural abstraction, Federle represented his native Switzerland in the '97 Venice Biennale, exhibits extensively throughout Europe and currently lives in Vienna. He has established himself as a quiet mentor for many younger abstract painters.

In this show, he presented a rewarding chronological installation of about 200 small-scale drawings in pencil, ink, crayon and wash, ranging from relatively naturalistic landscapes from the '70s to refined geometric language in the '90s. It was the first time his works on paper have been shown as a group. When confronting such a personal encyclopedia reflecting decades of artistic problem-solving, we can take pleasure in observing selective decision-making. Here one could discover a surprising range of visual "keepsakes." For instance, many of his works from the '80s seem to suggest subtle ties to 20th-century European design and to the graphic experimentation of early modernists. In the period 1980-83, he appears to find inspiration in typography. In *Untitled (#90)*, 1980, Federle employs colliding diagonals and erratic font changes as a means to invigorate visual language, paying homage to early Dadaist and Russian Constructivist text experiments. This pencil and felt-marker drawing, which reads like an eccentric poster, uses simple geometric assemblies growing from a strong diagonal axis to aid in the creation of optical movement.

Several works from the same period allude to furniture or architectural design. One reductive study is a contour pencil drawing which captures the graceful profile of a dog that is simultaneously reminiscent of a Marcel Breueresque chair. *Sign for an End* (1983), a red and blue crayon composition, synthesizes geometric structural order with the chaotic personality of a Tatlinesque construction. At the same time, it could be a design for a utopian logo. In works such as these, Federle extends his search for a painter's language by learning from functional forms.

In 1992, while spending time in Galisteo, N.M., Federle befriended Agnes Martin. It is a relationship that he acknowledges as influential and that was emphasized in the press release for the show. One is relieved not to see any direct visual influence, which presumably means that it has been translated into Federle's own artistic idiom. This absence of "Martinizing"--an appropriation evident in the work of numerous younger abstractionists--is the result of his tenacious search outside of painting for a personal vocabulary.