"REPICTURING ABSTRACTION: DAVID HEADLEY" by Richard Waller, University of Richmond Museum 1995

David Headley's appropriation of image and style represents a theoretical stance and a personal philosophy that embrace abstraction as a necessary way to fulfill the early promise of Modernism. The refiguration of abstraction is his approach to maintaining the viability of post-modern painting. Demonstrating what he calls his definitive style of "high formalism," his recent work involves the resolution of history painting and pre-modern art with post-modernist pluralism. He views Modernism as part of a legacy that comprises all of art history and material culture laid bare for use by the contemporary artist. For Headley, formalist principles are not necessarily reductivist, and "color and drawing, as well as the secondary characteristics of paining (form, texture, illusion) can be stretched significantly to embrace the sculptural potentialities of modern art. Duchamp and Johns need not be antithetical to Noland or Olitski. It is this philosophical schism that my painting has resolved." This ongoing "resolution" remains Headley's ambitious theoretical program for painting. In what he has aptly dubbed the "Style Wars" of twentieth-century art, he has made this war of fracturing and pluralism his cause.

Headley created images encompassing styles of abstraction, from expressionism to hard-edged pattern; banal images from popular culture, including Elvis, dinosaur "illustrations," and cartoon characters; and pastiches of traditional Western painting styles and realist images -- and he sets them free in an all-encompassing space akin to a time warp. His paintings involve all manner of media: fluorescent plexiglas, mosaic tile, tinted mirrors, needlepoint, liquid-and-sand mechanisms, television sets, air-brushing, watercolor, acrylic and oil on canvas, and traditional fresco painting. He unifies this broad combination of styles, passages, media, techniques, and experiences by framing his works in heavy, bold gold-leaf molding and fretwork; but this "traditional" framing becomes an integral element of Headley's paintings. They initially jolt us with their complex cacophony, but contemplation brings aesthetic order and enjoyment.

In his painting *Two Schools of Thought*, 1987-94, academic realism is placed cheek-and-jowl with diverse types of abstraction. We are overwhelmed by the interplay of pictorial experiences. Headley refers to this as "a heightened collision of styles, as Abstraction confronts Realism." Its appendages fairly explode from the wall into the real third dimension; only the frame seems to hold the work in check, allowing us to savor the range of painting he has placed before us. The central axis is broken by an open fluorescent-plexiglas cube jutting out almost two feet. Complex pattern-painting is "framed" into a spiral, while an academically painted nude is juxtaposed with an abstract-expressionist oil passage, protruding elements mimicking the figure's illusion, and a trellis-like abstraction painted in traditional fresco. Collaged vignettes include an airbrushed photograph of a forest fire, an acrylic-stained image of a Frederic Edwin Church iceberg painting, and a science-magazine illustration of a landscape on a moon of Jupiter. Headley has also included a watercolor abstraction found in the garbage, a found oil painting, a continuous-wave machine, and a working television set. His "high formalism" uses appropriation to bring us into a discourse between the two schools of painting. But this is decidedly a wide-ranging discussion. Although his dialectic should theoretically lead us to a resolution, the artist seems more intent on presenting contradictory, even incongruous ideas in order to revitalize the very act of contemplating contemporary abstraction. Perhaps the aesthetic experience of immersing ourselves in this intricate maze filled with color and forms is our resolution. The witty irony of the visual experience points beyond the "philosophical schism" of art-world polemics to a new way of seeing.