

# Gary Gagliano: Indices of Devotion

By Jonathan Goodman

Gary Gagliano's remarkable paintings nearly overwhelm the viewer with their repetitions of both material and spirit; it is important to say quickly that he has an intense, ongoing relationship with the Buddhist tradition in Thailand, where he has lived and visited regularly for many past years. The path he pursues is slightly idiosyncratic, in the sense that he follows precepts when in Thailand but reverts to the habits of New York life on returning to that city. This is no indication of lack of resolve—simply a result of living two types of lives, with the Buddhist experience informing and influencing his activity as a painter. This influence, however, is not a part of Gagliano's conscious thought; when he works on his art, his training and concentration take precedent.

Thus, Gagliano works contemplatively but without the awareness that he is doing so. He quite literally *builds* his paintings, which consist of row upon row of flattened whorls demarcating oval ellipses. These the artist regularly fills with ridged circles, one on top of the other, that to this viewer are suggestive of the individual coils of the Buddha's hair or of the ja-dees or *stupas*, Buddhist shrines that are central to the practice of the religion. This is my own reading--one hesitates to emphasize spiritual practice as the only influence on Gagliano's art. The artist himself emphasizes the facture of the painting; he sees it as the fulfilled promise of physical discipline. Each circle builds upon its previous, slightly larger point of paint; each whorl is itself a world that recommends itself to the artist and his audience as a self-contained object.

Gagliano emphasizes discipline and craft. The paintings themselves, which are marvels of physical and metaphysical restraint, work as sophisticated patterns of the mind. He is an example of a new kind of postulant, whose more worldly activities in New York are actually encouraged by the monks he visits in the Thai mountains near Burma. There is something very beautiful in the conflation of such different traditions, and Gagliano's awareness intelligently brings together experiences that others might take as differently inspired or even opposed.

In a photograph of one of the paintings Gagliano has completed, we see a surface of tiny, repetitive peaks, built from concentric circles of paint. As a vista, the surface of the painting looks like an expanse of mountains. We recognize that he constructs these pieces by working above them; he has built a plank with wheels that enables him to work closely on the painting's horizontally placed surface; his invention allows him control over the curving sweep of the wrist as he makes his art. Beyond the reference to natural features, the work also suggests the presence of thousands of ja=dees or *stupas*, indices of Buddhist devotion. The visual relationship of these forms is more or less abstract when compared to the shrines themselves.

In the white paintings, you can see how Gagliano weaves a net composed of eccentric ovals with the small ridged circles in their center; the effect is that of the fluency of water, which is literally and metaphorically a substance of great power, with a history of spiritual meaning in both the West and Asia. Sometimes the net of circles is filled with the raised circles and sometimes not. But the facture is key—Gagliano consistently reverts to hard work and concentration, so that the overall effect is one of focused

discipline and contemplative beauty. Another painting colors the circular modules so that a larger, abstract painting is constructed. The overall pattern is quite beautiful, reminding us that Gagliano has control not only over the miniature components of his art, he also sees what can be called the big picture.

From a distance, the painting looks like a topographical map, with a seeming ridge of gold at the top and a green area on the bottom left. Here the artist appears to be influenced by Western art legacies, images of abstraction that make their presence known as part of modernism's history. When Gagliano incorporates color into his myriad ovals, the effects can be unusually moving—in one green-over-yellow work, we see that the interaction of color is exquisitely rendered, and we see that the result is a bicultural sublime. Gagliano's finely built devotions demonstrate a genuine spiritual presence; however, that is not all they are. They remain wonderful paintings in their own right, both acknowledging and moving past the intricacies of their influence and making.

Jonathan Goodman is an editor, writer, and teacher who specializes in modern and contemporary art. He has written reviews and articles for such magazines as *Art in America*, *Sculpture*, and *Art Asia Pacific*. Based in New York City, he teaches at Pratt Institute and the Parsons School of Design.