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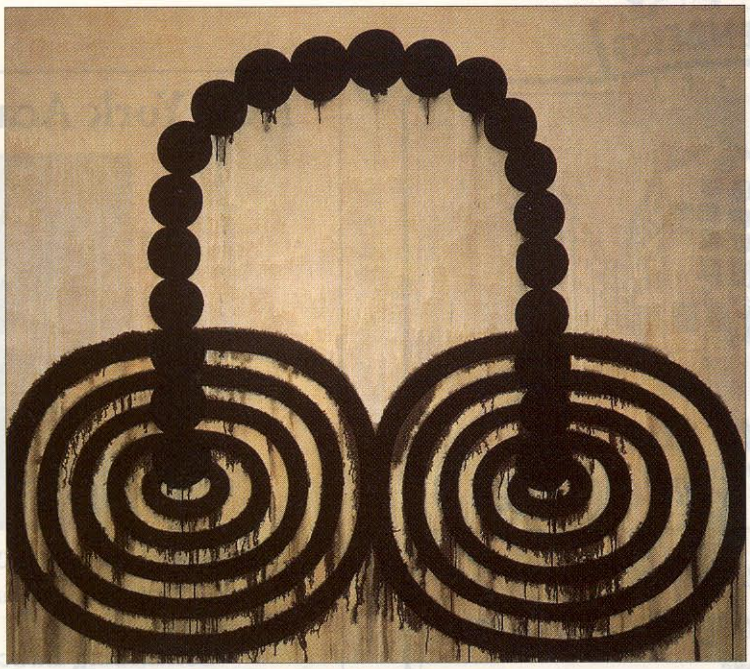
Steven Cushner

Hemphill Fine Arts
Washington, D.C.

Steven Cushner's terrific third solo exhibition at Hemphill Fine Arts effectively marked his territory in the world of Washington abstract painting. His reliance on a combination of vigorous patterning and delicate staining explicitly refers to Washington Color Field painters Kenneth Noland and Gene Davis. His muscular, intrepid—even eccentric—expressionism, however, sets him apart.

In the 1998 painting *Splash*, two groups of umber concentric circles dominate the lower quarters of the canvas; an arc of black disks connects their centers. The background is a cascading wash of pale pinks and off-whites. Given its title, the painting might depict the ripples and splatter of a splash meeting its reflection. But everything is slightly off-kilter. Underpaintings of the circles drip straight down the surface, violating any illusion of depth, and the heavy lines are loopy and coarse. The inner circles can look like wacky Philip Guston eyes that emanate cartoon sight lines or two turntables speedily ejecting records.



Steven Cushner, *Splash*, 1998, oil on canvas, 75" x 86". Hemphill Fine Arts.

On the Rocks is another satisfying work. The central shape is a maroon container. The form of this vessel could be derived from a fancy cocktail glass, but it also looks like a pot with a halo of more records hovering around the rim. At the same time, the deep maroon resembles dried blood, transforming the disks into Eucharistic wafers. The ambiguous forms succeed in yielding multiple interpretations. A dark wash that drips to one side of the composition suggests that the image has just arrived in the painting and is in a hurry to go somewhere else.

—Rex Weil