Steven Cushner

Hemphill Fine Arts

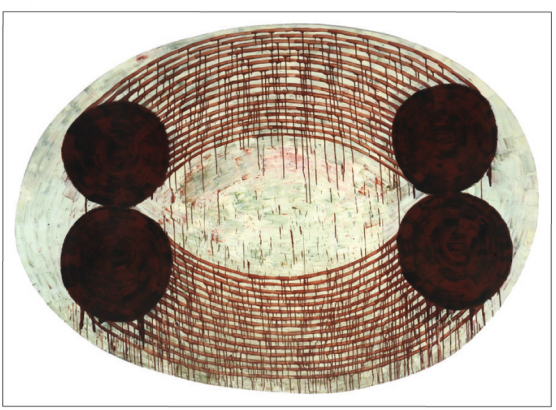
Washington, D.C.

During an intense three-year period toward the beginning of his career, Washington artist Steven Cushner confined himself to a limited palette and a set of simplified organic and gestural elements. Working with meticulous lines, plentiful drips, and repeating forms, he developed a series of large, primarily black-and-white shaped canvases that were unrestrained by traditional rectilinear formats, their physical presences instead dictated by the imagery they contained. This fascinating show brought together seven of the resulting acrylic paintings, and a handful of related charcoals on paper, all from 1991–93—and they look awfully good to 21st-century eyes.

Cushner has said that his work from this era was inspired by the shapes of real-life objects—a fountain, rippling waves, or cylindrical cans. The large canvas *Fountain* (1992), for example, blends a series of cascading waterfalls punctuated with free-flowing drips. And the "Tides" series of three canvases from 1992 evokes the movement of water in wavy, repeating, black-and-white forms that seem to emulate the ebb and flow of ocean tides.

The artist achieved nearly mesmerizing effects with *Betrothal*, a 1991 extravaganza measuring nearly ten feet across, in which two precisely delineated cylindrical forms come together in a union that reflects the work's title. In *Bola* (1991), one of the few color works on view, two sets of reddish-brown balls at either end of swooping strokes of comparable color are united in an energetic, esthetically pleasing composition.

Since Cushner's simple, early paintings, he has gone on to make brightly patterned pieces. But this show's return to some of his artistic roots demonstrated his versatility, and reaffirmed the appeal of his rigorously restrained earlier paintings. ***—Stephen May***



Steven Cushner, *Bola*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 72½" x 95". Hemphill Fine Arts.