

Chicago Tribune, March 24, 2005

**Appreciating the abstract;
Plagens' work keeps visual relevance while growing in scope over three
decades**

Alan G. Artner, Tribune art critic.

Chicagoans probably know Peter Plagens best as the longtime senior writer for fine arts at Newsweek magazine. But some may recall that from time to time he also has exhibited paintings here, and a selection from nearly three decades of them now make up "Peter Plagens: An Introspective," at the Columbia College A + D 11th Street Gallery.

All the works are abstractions that have made their way regardless of fashion. This is heartening to see, particularly at a gallery associated with a teaching institution, where it may be an inspiration to students. But American abstract painting has been so far out of the spotlight in recent years that an artist as much his own man as Plagens cannot help but be of wider interest, especially in Chicago, which always has prided itself on an appreciation of artistic mavericks.

Here is work that looks like no one else's and keeps on doing so as it changes according to nothing but the inner necessity of the artist.

What's more, the work grows from a large world view, not a narrow theoretical position or conceptual program.

The primary impact of the work is intended to be visual. And whenever elegance has come close to giving a settled look, the artist has shaken things up in the interest of a condition perpetually threatened and unstable.

The earliest pieces on show, from the mid- to late-1970s, protest against the cool order of the abstraction then dominant with a single, large assertive element strategically placed on a white field. The element is always hard-edged and geometric, here either incomplete discs or broken rings varying in color and thickness. These elements forcefully interact with the delicate painting, underpainting and penciled divisions of the field.

Geometric elements strong in color remain as constants in the work, though they become irregular polygons and sometimes are accompanied by wedgelike appendages. The fields on which they are adjusted also darken and take on colored splatter at the edges.

These paintings, from the 1980s, are bouncy and remarkably generous in optical stimulation.

The bright geometric elements eventually shrink, yielding in size and number to loosely

drawn and brushed forms that introduce greater instability. From the late '80s forward, order is more tenuous in paintings that look more difficult and sober, better suggesting the cold uncertainty of the existentialist viewpoint that has been the philosophical core of the work all along.

For nearly 30 years, then, the pieces continue to sustain a high level of visual interest, never becoming merely food for thought. It's an achievement often overlooked today, but even the smallest works on paper -- collages that bring in patches of the verifiable world - - here succeed at the best sort of provocation, one that requires no words to communicate to viewers.

This first substantial survey of Plagens' art is accompanied by a solid 68-page catalog with excellent color reproductions.