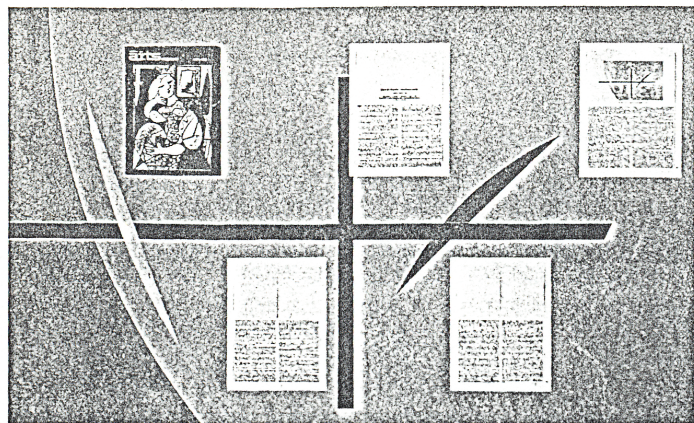


## ARTFORUM

JANUARY 1992

REVIEWS



David Diao, *PLUS* (silkscreen on "Chinatown," 1974-75), 1991, acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 79" x 107".

hand, it is difficult not to consign to his fragmented image clusters a unifying narrative that begins and ends as an extended mediation on human relations. On the other, the narrative can easily be read as a meditation on painting itself. Though less overwrought than Alberto Giacometti's drawings, Sarmento's use of approximation as a pictorial technique, and his inclusion of ambivalent signs that function both as things in themselves and referential images (e.g. the square that is also a window), suggest that the prevailing mood of anxiety that quietly infuses these works isn't exclusively dedicated to the pictorial scenarios but concerns the very practice of painting in its search for self-definition. Sarmento's paintings certainly appeal to those who crave narrative, yet they are much more savvy, suggesting that painterliness, levels of psychological engagement, and symbols that bounce in and out of the frame need not be anathema to conceptual practice.

—Jan Avgikos

## DAVID DIAO

## POSTMASTERS GALLERY

When looking at the work of a live artist, one finds oneself mentally assessing the career thing in terms of potency and or size. Is it big or medium, hot or stale? How active is their symbolic organ in the art world? Of course, we say, size isn't important. Nevertheless, the evaluation mode kicks in, like some internally held homeostatic mechanism of curiosity slash *invidia* and inevitably swerves back upon oneself. In every show, the subtext of success, ambition,

sour grapes, and/or idolatry lurks barely beneath the surface. I envy people who don't always compare themselves with others, but I don't know any.

What David Diao has done that is beautiful is he has taken the compulsion to obsess over this thing—precisely the "personal stuff" deemed petty and thereby repressed from tough hard-edged ultraformalist abstract painting—and put it into his tough hard-edged ultraformalist abstract paintings. He combines the self-referentiality of obsession over one's career with the self-referentiality of abstraction. Rather than a nauseous *mise en abyme* of biographical and esthetic surplus masturbation, the result is quite moving. It is brilliant to combine the pristine formalism of hard-edged abstraction with exactly what it thrives on, disavows, and claims to transcend—ego; money; the tears, glory, and vanity of success in the art world; and ordinary information like where and how big was the artist's studio. He omitted telling us what he paid in rent.

My favorite painting was *Sales 2* (all works 1991): red dots indicating sales for each year of the artist's career expand, contract, and sometimes disappear depending upon how much he sold. The pulsation of the dots creates a Modernist tension, and activates the picture plane, both formally and financially. *Resume* is heroic in scale and takes up an entire wall; in a subtle concession toward modesty, it rests on the floor. Here, Diao lists year by year all of his one-person shows, with the titles of the paintings included. In some years there were none. *Studios* simply lists the addresses of his studios and the years he spent there. *MINUS*

phallus in some kind of esthetic exorcism. Which leads, finally, to my other favorite piece: a panel painting half black and half white. Barely legible under layers of paint on the top half, it says "Mean things I said about other artists"; on the bottom "Mean things other artists said about me." The show demonstrated how art so often springs from the courage of omission.

—Rhonda Lieberman

(silkscreen on "Navigator," 1978), and *PLUS* (silkscreen on "Chinatown," 1974-75), are two large earlier pseudo neo-Constructivist paintings by Diao; stenciled upon each are the texts of reviews of his work. Thomas Lawson and Hal Foster are down on Diao in *MINUS*, while Joseph Masheck is positive in *PLUS*.

The other beautiful thing about this show was not there. In his piece in the "Conceptual Abstraction" show at Sidney Janis, Diao documents the works of his idol, Barnett Newman, simply listing them by name and date. Many works were left unfinished. Diao was fascinated that an artist who wielded such great influence over him would have such a sporadic output. Whether or not you know about the waxing, waning, and waxing trajectory of his own career, it is moving to see someone so upfront about his compulsion to compare himself to his hero, keeping score of his output in a kind of narcissistic wound-licking usually not practiced in public. What I love about the Newman piece is the way it inspired Diao to go over the top and document himself the way he documented his master. For anyone who can imagine the self-conscious passion of this project, the austerity of the names, dates, and figures becomes incredibly moving.

The entire Postmasters show, entitled "1968-1991: ...a real allegory," functioned like a personal scrapbook, but one representing the artist only with the facts, figures, and material amounting to a career. It's as if he's producing and narcissistically cathecting onto himself or rather his career as lost object, saying, These are the traces I left, and anticipatorily memorializing his cultural

JANUARY 1992 • 99