

# from Art in America: by Edward Leffingwell

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Gudrun Mertes-Frady's commitment to the material pleasure of paint and her expanding vocabulary of formal interests have recently resulted in a remarkable change from the saturated swirls and shingled grids that characterize her work of the mid- to late 1990's. A few years ago, her pictorial structures seemed to deliquesce and shift in focus, and at some point in 2001 they transformed completely into colonaded tiers that resemble the spines of stacked books. In the artist's sixth solo exhibition at Rosenberg + Kaufman, her newest paintings (all dated 2003) consist of painterly simulations of abstracted circuit grids, as in *microchips*, the elements now intersecting and extending end on end.

In *Shift to Myth* (72 by 68 inches), one of the largest and most hauntingly electric of these paintings, the pale slate-gray and white circuit patterns present, to near hallucinatory effect, a glow sufficiently intense and deep to recall the lustrous appearance of encaustic. The work seems to float before the surface of the wall, challenging the eye to follow the logic of its architectonic entanglements. The parallel and interlocking bars, all either vertical or horizontal, reveal underpainting of madder lake and ultramarine along the edges, which adds to the richness of the principal hues. Less than 2 inches wide and of various lengths, these bars of color offer evidence of the artist's hand in the strokes of palette and putty knives, with none of the marks assuming the role of figure. *Blue Surround* has the same dimensions but double the number of colors, which makes it seem larger. Two reds, darker and brighter, course through the painting in a rhythm of systol and diastol, along with two blues that have a similar relationship to each other in hue and intensity. Here, the bars proceed like stair steps. The paler blue functions as ground, and the dominating reds dance across the surface. The abutting edges reveal underpainting and, in places, the exposed weave of the canvas itself.

The black and slate-gray bands of the somewhat smaller *Manhattan* (63 by 60 inches) are deployed in such a way that the eye moves easily from top to bottom and side to side. As she did in *Blue Surround*, Mertes-Frady establishes a figure/ground relationship that appears to hold the ground to the literal surface of the painting's support, without illusive depth. In the context of her previous work, these successful paintings are of a sufficiently radical turn that the artist's signature concerns are identifiable more in the handling of paint than in the constitution of a grid.