

Paintings to bear in mind

Prints, graphics march into town

By Christopher Knight
Herald Examiner art critic

Don Suggs' paintings from the past several years have taken on a difficult problem: Is there any way to use the conventional language of modern abstract painting, which was born and bred in a complex effort to render the ineffable, in order to engage in a convincing inquiry into social and political life?

While raising a tantalizing array of insights, the show of Suggs' recent work at L.A. Louver Gallery's Market St. space offers no definitive solutions. Oddly, these paintings seem to discount or mistrust a major factor in the equation.

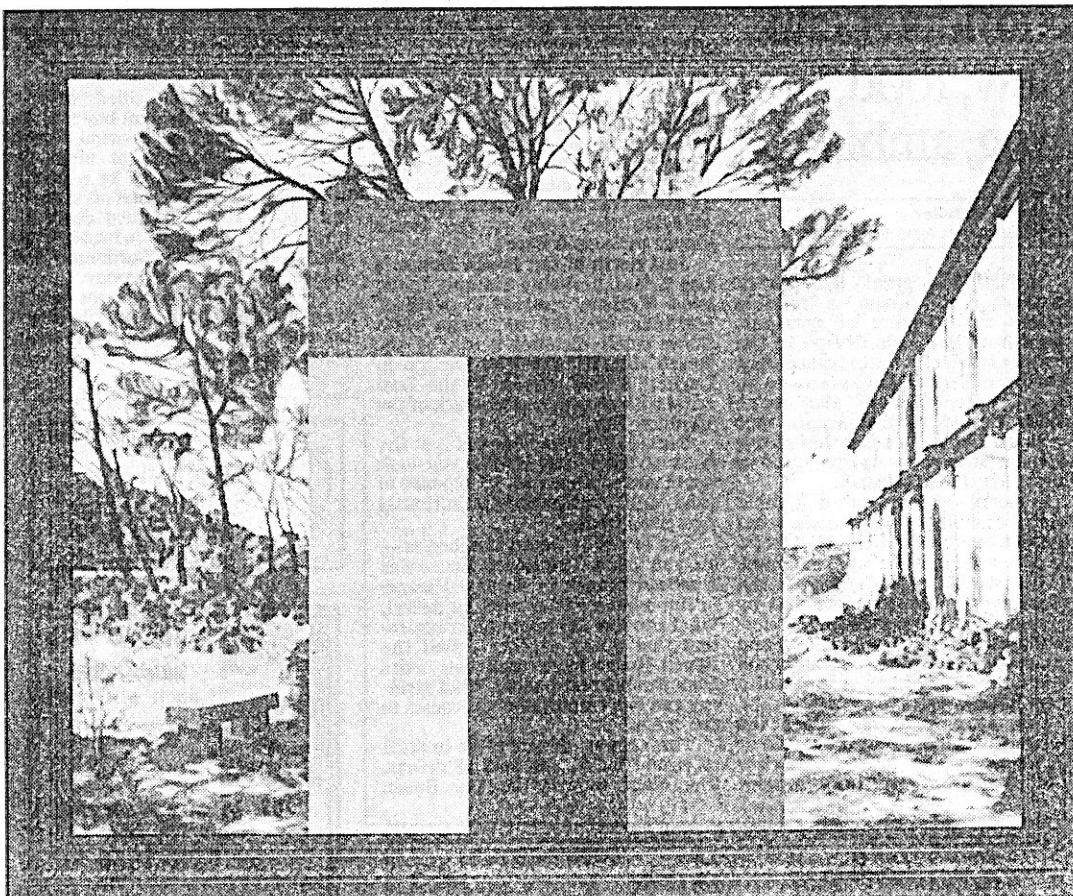
With a few exceptions, the 27 paintings, made between 1985 and 1989, fall into three basic groups: repeated black-and-white images of an anonymous man, diverse black and white images of famous men and women, and colorful postcard views of landscapes (mostly mountains).

Whatever the case, each of these pictures is partially obscured by a geometric abstraction, which is centered low on the surface of the picture. Sometimes the abstraction puts you in mind of a particular artist — Ellsworth Kelly, John McLaughlin, Brice Marden — and sometimes the abstraction suggests, or actually describes, a national flag.

As with Jonathan Borofsky's geometric flag paintings from a few years ago, these motifs deftly merge conflicting ideas about identity. Abstract painting, which has frequently assumed the role of pathway to the subconscious and inner uniqueness, here evokes an outer signature style, or even the collective social identity of a nation.

The single, anonymous man whose black-and-white face is obscured by colorful, flaglike abstractions in "The Citizen Series," and whose identity shifts with the color combinations Suggs employs (he's at once Irish, Nigerian and Italian, or Hungarian, Arab and Dutch, depending on the color combo), is posed in a manner familiar from passports, yearbook pictures or identification cards.

Similarly, Suggs' blocked landscapes are scenic views, or those prominent features of nature we immediately recognize or identify. Frequently, the palette of both landscape and abstraction/flag is the same, further compounding the proposition of interconnected nationality, terrain and image.



"Garden of the Asylum," 1988, is included in Don Suggs' exhibit at L.A. Louver Gallery in Venice through Oct. 21.

Suggs' paintings are engagingly complex cat's cradles, tying together seemingly disparate fingers that turn out to be part of a single hand (or fist). What holds them back is their refusal to acknowledge the sensual power of paint as an elemental ingredient.

When his Mardenlike panels of color obscure a van Gogh landscape of the asylum at St. Remy, the smooth, decidedly inert surfaces of both renditions might well have been designed to imply the importance of photographic reproduction to the phenomenon being addressed, but, Suggs' photorealist technique simultaneously devalues the medium at hand.

As a result, these paintings suffer from a degree of bloodlessness. They happen largely in your head.

What	"Don Suggs: Paintings"
Where	L.A. Louver Gallery, 77 Market St., Venice
When	Through Oct. 21
Info	822-4955

As a printmaker, Georg Baselitz has engaged many of the same issues prominent in his paintings. The selection of 27 prints at L.A. Louver's Venice Boulevard location spans the period from 1965 to 1988, although most are of recent vintage. (A few of the prints are 1988 restrikes of woodblocks carved in 1966.) Such images as the eagle and the secular Madonna of mother and child are familiar from the West German artist's paintings — almost all are traditional icons of German culture.

So is the medium. The woodcut, raised to powerful heights by artists

from Albrecht Durer in the 15th century to Ernst Ludwig Kirchner in our own, is closely tied to the glorious history of Germanic art. As with his paintings, Baselitz turns these conventions literally on their heads, rendering his later woodcut pictures upside down.

Their blunt carving seems graphically muddled, however, even bland. The prime exceptions are the very earliest works: two etchings with aquatint from 1965, of a "Rebel" and a "Hero," and one extraordinary woodcut from 1966, titled "Partisan."

Partly militaristic, partly evocative of roles assigned to the modern artist, Baselitz's subjects hauntingly engage the dilemma facing German art in the generation following World War II.

If Baselitz's paintings are typically more convincing, these early prints do provocatively suggest a probable debt to a surprising source — namely, American pop art. You won't find commercial products, movie stars or advertisements anywhere in these prints.

You will find an impressive array of popular clichés about the intrinsic nature of German culture, clichés Baselitz was soon to hot-wire in eloquent ways.

What	"Georg Baselitz: Graphic Works, 1965-1989"
Where	L.A. Louver, 55 N. Venice Blvd.
When	Through Oct. 21
Info	822-4955

One of the great shows seen in Los Angeles last year was the superbly organized survey of drawings by

Bruce Nauman, an artist whose work since the 1960s seems destined to maintain its increasingly clear position among the very first ranks.

Not often seen, Nauman's drawings offered a marvelous insight into his sculptural and environmental art. Now, galleries in New York and Los Angeles have undertaken a large-scale exhumation of his work as a printmaker.

Since 1970, Nauman has made etchings, lithographs, silkscreens and a few editioned sculptures, many of them produced at Gemini G.E.L. and Cirrus. Indeed, it comes as something of a surprise to recognize just how copious his production has been. A small selection is currently on view at Pence Gallery in Santa Monica, but a full complement of Nauman's prints will unfold over the next few months in a three-part survey at Earl McGrath Gallery in West Hollywood.

If a series of gallery shows can't be expected to offer the same thoroughness as can a museum survey, this one should nonetheless give us a provocative account of a hitherto unexamined area.

Part I looks principally at the earliest work, from 1970-73 (a few later pieces are inexplicably included), in which the artist's deceptively simple use of language begins to engage the printing process in conceptually surprising ways. Stay tuned.

What	"Bruce Nauman Prints: Part I, 1970-1973"
Where	Earl McGrath Gallery, 454 N. Robertson Blvd., West Hollywood
When	Through Oct. 14
Info	652-9850