

Rocky Mountain News

New York years colored Chisman's work

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By Mary Voelz Chandler

Even before looking at art became a way to make a living, it certainly was a way to make a life. And when writing about art became part of my way to make a living here years ago, the first artist I wanted to write about was Dale Chisman.

That's because I was so impressed by his paintings, where he created his own vocabulary of symbols, expansive works where every mark was just so (and just so important) in the composition, and where there was so much going on beneath the surface of each painting. I could fall into them for hours.

So this past summer, during a tribute to Chisman organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver, I was intrigued by talk about his work done through the 1970s; the New York years, everyone called them. People - me included - wanted to see what he had done during that 15-year period. So did he.

Chisman moved to New York in 1969, after earning a master of fine arts degree from the University of Colorado. He lived there until 1984, then returned to Denver. He worked in a gallery as a registrar (the Eric Gallery), and he painted, and he then showed work in a different gallery (the prestigious Martha Jackson Gallery).



Dale Chisman, *Primal*, 1978, acrylic on canvas, 62 x 62 inches.

He studied in various places, including the Royal College of Art in London and at Yale University. And in 1975, he received a fellowship to the MacDowell Colony, founded in 1907 in Peterborough, N.H.

So Chisman and Robin Rule heeded others' desires to see the "New York years," but he set a cutoff of 1975, since work he did during that fellowship helped move him from figural to the more non-representational work for which he is now known.

The result, at Rule Gallery through Jan. 14, is two shows: five canvases painted from 1975 through 1978, in the front gallery, and in the back two spaces, another eight made in 2005, a burst of creativity that triumphed over health issues.

This is not a retrospective, but a set of bookends, a 30-year look back and leap forward over years of work familiar to those who have followed his career.

In those early works, in acrylic on canvas, there still are somewhat figural elements, but that is overshadowed by a heavy reliance on the grid. Dividing the blank slate into quarters, Chisman has used each square as its own mini-background, while occasionally using a form to overlap where all converge.

In the 1978 *Primal*, for instance, Chisman spotlights a hand set over a square but then lost in a light trail of paint below, as if scraping a wall; a triangle and an X'ed-out area complete the imagery, though all are set over complicated underpainting and drawing. The hand, he notes, is a sign of those times, "a search for identity, mark-making that says 'I'm here.' "

The 1975 *Painting in Grey*, though, features an off-center grid with a thick brown bar that ties the quadrants together. Here and throughout, Chisman relies on various shades of the color gray, including spectral violet hues in *Script* and *Open*. The thin winter light of the front gallery picks up stray colors from these muted works.



Dale Chisman, *Passage 5 - Western Theory*, 2005, oil on linen, 60 x 66 inches.

Move ahead to 2005, and it is a somewhat different story. Years ago, Chisman shifted to painting in oil on linen, a slower-drying medium on a surface with a finer texture. In the 2005 "Passages" series, in the back gallery and Viewing Room space, are paintings in which the nearly raw linen is left visible, in some cases overlaid by a grid, in many cases featuring a vessel-like shape he refers to as a crucible. A form he introduced in a show last year - a web-like tangle - is not in evidence here, though Chisman's sure placement of line is strong.

That big chunky brown bar from *Painting in Grey* over the years migrated into a slim slash of paint on either side of a painting or at the bottom. In the new work, this visual anchor again, in some instances, has moved, in one case to a bold, unorthodox diagonal, in another to a floating horizontal form of black and peach (the really cheeky *Passage 5-Western History*, which introduces another color into the expected primary trio and neutral browns and blacks).

The shows at Rule, which open tonight, answer two key questions. The easy one: "What about those New York years?" More complicated: how an artist can continue to evolve and grow, while leaving an impressive legacy of form and color.