

# ARTFORUM

MAY 1998

## ERIC WOLF

### JESSICA FREDERICKS GALLERY

Applying the reductive rigor of black-and-white abstraction to scenes from nature, mostly in upstate New York, Eric Wolf's open-air landscape paintings look more like mazes or optical illusions in some kind of puzzle or pages from a pristine coloring book than anything from the Hudson River School. Moreover, the views offered in the seven paintings in this show weren't picturesque, majestic, or sublime, but mysterious in a rather banal way. The roiling masses in *Cloud Painting* and *Cloud Painting II* (all works 1997) are replete with the kind of weird partial images—ears, shoulders, scrunched faces—that the imaginative skygazer finds looming in tufts of cumulus. *Molten Sky* and *Cornered Tree Tops* feature similar atmospheric turbulence above views of woods in black outlined in white (or maybe white outlined in black), while *Pine* is an all-over, undulating riot of forest forms.

Wolf may be distilling details into their abstract essential energies, stripping nature down to black and white, but that's not to say these paintings aren't full of complexities. Like the optical tricks they evoke, they offer a heady mix of dualities. They could be whimsical descendants of Pop; but Wolf employs a strict method that suggests the gravity of painterly tradition. Each canvas, roughly four by three feet or five by four feet, is stretched over plywood, coated with gesso, and sanded smooth, and Wolf uses just a single brush to make each work. So up close, the paintings reveal the brush's sweep and show subtle variations in tone, depending on how much paint the bristles carried. There's no getting around a certain irony in an artist of the '90's working *en plein air*; yet Wolf's paintings undeniably partake of an animism akin to that of the landscapist Charles Burchfield.

This exhibit also showed Wolf applying his method to another moribund genre, the still life, with two ink drawings of pumpkins and gourds and two paintings of Chinese scholars' rocks. Here too the choice of objects is strategic; the rock paintings, *Perforated Vertical Stone in the Form of a Dancing Figure* and *Large Rock with a Pronounced Overhang and Perforations*, portray objects that are seen as microcosms of nature, and thus offer tantalizing links between the representation of an object and the representation of nature *tout suite*; painting an object of contemplation versus painting as contemplation.

Though the black-on-white strokes of his canvases resemble the inking of prints, Wolf isn't invoking the trope of bringing the appearance of mechanical reproduction to the handmade, as pioneered by Roy Lichtenstein. That effect is a result of the precision (but not perfection) of his process. Each stroke remains an individual entity while playing a larger role in creating the whole image. And yet, like Lichtenstein in his giant brushstroke paintings, Wolf amplifies the artifice of painting by enlarging its fundamental unit. His idiosyncratic method allows him to carry on the tradition of painting from nature while speaking to more contemporary beliefs about our ultimate remove from it.



Eric Wolf, *Molten Sky*, 1997,  
oil on canvas, 60 x 48".