



Paul Manes: *Holding the Fort*, 1999, burlap and pigment on canvas, 96 by 108 inches; at Kouros.

Paul Manes at Kouros

The first thing one remarks of Paul Manes's paintings of sprawingly rendered stacked bowls is the complex sensuousness of their surfaces. The artist layers his canvases with irregular pieces of burlap, which often retain the names and numbers of their commercial use, and paints over them. He limits himself to a few colors, employing the off-white of kaolin and such dark earth tones as red, brown and black in his all-over, schematic compositions. His use of burlap recalls the work of the postwar Italian abstractionist Alberto Burri and also the thick, materially oriented surfaces of the Spanish painter Antoni Tàpies.

This is not to say that the 51-year-old, Texas-born, New York-based artist has forgotten his immediate American past; the vigor and dense physicality of his surfaces also bring to mind the Abstract Expressionists' love of paint. In his affection for tangible materials, Manes takes his place in an established tradition of activity understood as its own end. In a number of cases, a work's large size establishes an epic power; for example, the near 9-by-9-foot dimensions of

Holding the Fort give the painting a weight and grandness which would not proceed from the bowls alone.

Holding the Fort, with its stacks of ceramic hemispheres outlined in black, its drips falling across the kaolin white, finds beauty in a commonplace object. Manes's lyricism is expressed in both the humble subject matter and the way he paints. The stacks lurch and nearly collapse, so there is a kind of physical drama to the compositions. The bowls are always portrayed as empty, but there is little to suggest that Manes is making a philosophical statement; more properly, the viewer sees the works

as exercises in the presentation of material forms. In Manes's charcoal versions of the bowls, such as *Notturmo* (1999), the dark shapes look like explorations of chiaroscuro.

Other paintings, such as *Truce* and *Que barbaridad* (both 1999), continue Manes's serial investigation into the dialogue between the painting of the object and the object itself; one can easily see stenciled lettering on the burlap that gives the

painting a degree of material realism, speaking to life as opposed to art. His variations on a theme are striking and memorable, because for him the medium and the message are facets of the same thing.

—Jonathan Goodman