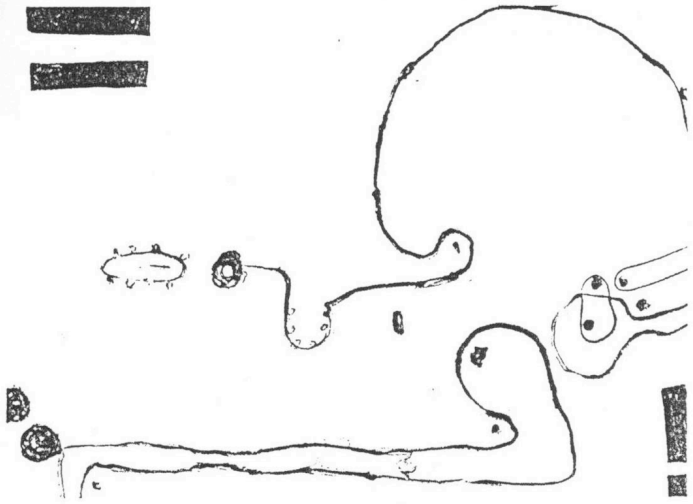
Donald, Kuspit: „Anton Henning Vrej Baghoomian Gallery“, Artforum, Nr. 2, 1992



Anton Henning, *Drawing of Lovers*, #5, 1991, oil on canvas, 104" x 11'8".

ANTON HENNING

VREJ BAGHOOMIAN GALLERY

The surfaces of Anton Henning's abstract paintings beckon to us mischievously. Wittily encrusted and ironically imperfect, they are a disguise: fatally cold quicksand made to look like lush tropics. The titles confirm their perversity; one mock–Kenneth Noland piece, asymmetrically divided between overripe orange and bilious black, is called *Cheese Wiz and Ripe Plaintains* (all works 1991), as though we were being presented, on the platter of the canvas, with a meltdown of Velveeta and rotten fruit. *Become Rich, Become an Artist in Paris* shows a field of cute curlicues dramatically framed by a black geometric form, as though this decadent, facile union of opposites were the look best gauged to make it in the capital of fashion. With pseudoseriousness, *1/3 Cup Grated Almonds; 2 Oz. Semi-Sweet Chocolate, Chopped; 1 Tablespoon Grated Orange Zest; 1 Tablespoon Grated Lemon Zest; 2 Tablespoons Brown Sugar; 1 Tablespoon Sweet Wine; 1 Cup Heavy Cream; 1 Egg; 1 Cup Expresso; Pinch Salt* takes painting-as-cuisine to an absurd extreme. Is Henning of the death-of-painting persuasion, offering us works that treat paint as a kind of glorified waste material to be spread in pseudopolymorphous perverse abandon? Indeed, there is a faux romantic aspect to many of Henning's paintings, as in the sentimentally pink *Painting of Lovers*. He spoofs the whole repertoire of Modernist abstract images and modes, from Joan Miró through Color Field painting, offering works that often combine a gestural, drawn quality with murky painterly effects.

What comes across is an artist who wants it both ways: to make a joke of painting—that retardataire mode of art-making outpaced by mechanically made imagery (but hasn't the mechanical in art also become tired and smug?)—and to explore seriously the expressive possibilities of paint, hoping for new, however comic, sensual effects. Indeed, comic sensuality is exactly what Henning is about; that is, he presents us with a sensuality that makes fun of itself to defend itself. Henning's surfaces are infatuated by their own eroticism, as it were, but conflicted to the extent that they are cunningly humorous. His works are not just another ironical revival of the dead languages of modern art history, as has been frequently suggested; rather, they are fraught with an embarrassed sense of freshly sensual painterliness. Henning is ashamed of the pleasure he takes in paint, yet he clearly takes it just the same.

In previous works he did much canceling of collaged images with paint, or else used paint to underscore his "infatuation" (his own word) with the images, which was, in effect, a way of nullifying his inner connection with them. The new work, however, for all its debunking tendency, shows a yearning for tactile surface as an end in itself. Henning ultimately believes in the power of paint. He gives us an important clue to at least one camp of new abstract painters: they really want to wallow in "pure" paint, just because they don't think it pure. For them, painting is the last chance to show that art really is a dirty game. —*DK*