

## MICHAEL WRIGHT AND DANIELLE SHELLEY

DAVID RICHARD CONTEMPORARY  
130 LINCOLN AVENUE, SANTA FE

I had a crazy, colorful crush on Tangee Green in middle school in the late 1970s. She sat in front of me in geometry class and I poked pencils into her strawberry blonde hair to get her to turn around and flirt. Her real name was Tangerine, but she went by Tangee with two E's, because a Y would have made her Tangy, like the astronaut drink that was still orbiting the eighth grade lunchroom in those days. Carter's presidency was flailing, and Reagan was about to sucker the middle class into accepting that they should only get a teensy trickle of the nation's economic gains, but I didn't care about any of that.

One strangely attractive thing about her was her coloring, which (as if she were a fictional character) aligned perfectly with her moniker. Her freckled face and orange tousle meant she was the tone of the fruit after which she had been named. Had her hippy parents named her after the surreal sixties-era psychedelic rock band Tangerine Dream, which had once performed at a Salvador Dalí opening? Some answers are irredeemably lost in the past. The next fall we went off to different schools and I never saw her again.

What brought me to this nostalgic reverie was a visit to David Richard Contemporary to see the works of Michael Wright and Danielle Shelley. Both are abstract painters, in different modes, and I was struck by the use of tangerine tonalities in a number of the strongest works on view, triggering the aforementioned chromatic childhood memories. This is something that good abstract painting does, though it is not always acknowledged. It can take you to places long forgotten and associations obscurely buried in your psyche. Much is made of the formal qualities of abstract work, as this is safe territory for art writers and appreciators, but the real value of this kind of work is its ability to elicit personal connections and subjective associations.

No matter how well resolved an abstract piece is, it is really only worth looking at, or living with, if it also manages to magically plumb the depths of one's soul. Anything less is just a waste of time. The meaning or purpose of the artwork for the artist is largely irrelevant; while the real generosity of this kind of work is that for each and every viewer it is ultimately "all about me" (meaning you). Neither Michael Wright nor Danielle Shelley set out to make paintings about the innocence of unrequited love, but (in my case) that's what they ended up doing, because both are strong and successful painters.

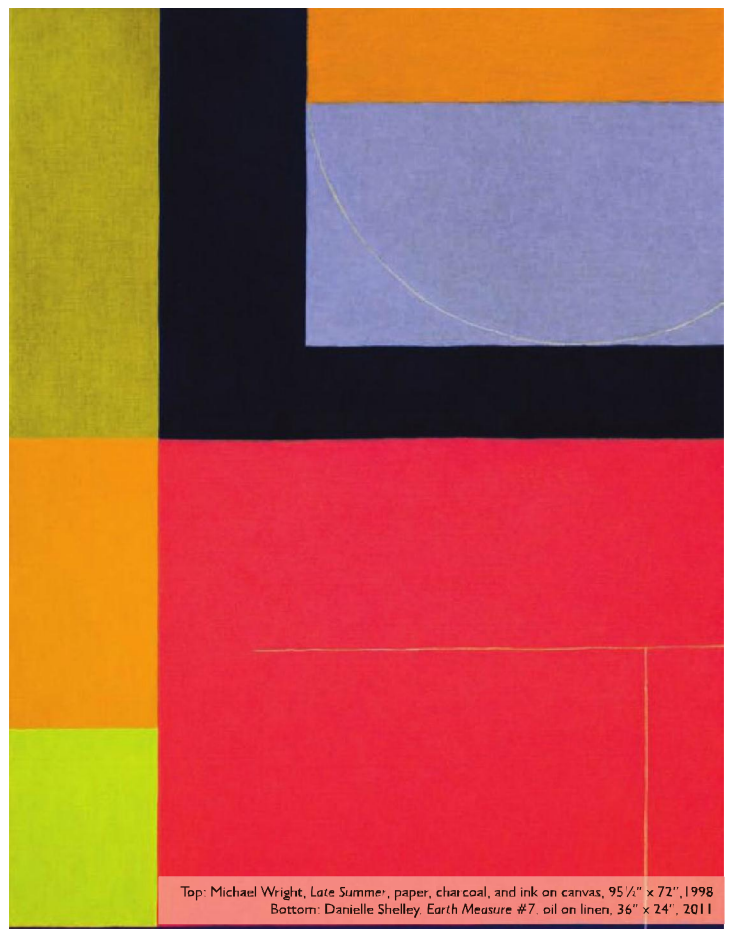
Michael Wright was born in New Rochelle, New York, in 1931, to a family of writers and artists. He studied painting at numerous prestigious institutions, including the Yale Art and Music School, served in the Korean War, and began his long-running career as a painter in New York City in the 1950s. He did a stint as de Kooning's studio assistant in the mid-sixties and his abstract expressionist work reflects this. There are great compositional similarities, but where de Kooning focuses on linear sweeps, and his signature brushwork, Wright is more obsessed with shifting shapes and patches of color. The drama is in the density of his blacks and how his edges interact.

In the large paper-and-ink on canvas composition *Late Summer*, swaths of color, including a number of peaches, pinks, and, yes, tangerines are set against mysterious patches of inky blackness that magically project the aura of rich heat and fecundity typical of the season. Wright overlays flutterings of calligraphic linearity along the edges of certain shapes, making them vibrate and sing. The song of the locust tinged with the bittersweet onset of autumnal darkness gives this piece a soul-searching strength.

Danielle Shelley was born in Houston, Texas, and grew up in the Bay Area. She's traveled all over the world, worked for the Peace Corps in Ghana, and finds inspiration in African textiles and Donald Judd's minimalism. Her paintings update Suprematism with the inclusion of secondary and tertiary colors, and just a touch of touch. Where other geometric abstractionists (notably Judd) have sought to eliminate the "artist's hand," Shelley's geometric work is distinguished by a sense of physical making that does just the opposite. This has a humanizing effect that wondrously animates her work. She's an excellent colorist, and seeing this work in reproduction is almost like not seeing it at all. One needs to stand before each piece to catch the interactions of color that are largely dependent upon the scale of each shape.

*Earth Measure #7* recalls Robert Mangold's eccentricities, and the green and gray rectangles whisper the melodies of Matisse's *Piano Lesson*, but what I like best about it, of course, is the large, sumptuous section of tangerine. I'm thirteen years old again, back in geometry class; the un-bathed instructor draws lines on the chalkboard as I swoon over the tangle of tangerine hair tangent to the freckled nape of Tangee's neck. Shelley's perfect picture sends that selfsame tingle up my own spine.

—JON CARVER



Top: Michael Wright, *Late Summer*, paper, charcoal, and ink on canvas, 95 1/2" x 72", 1998  
Bottom: Danielle Shelley, *Earth Measure #7*, oil on linen, 36" x 24", 2011