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THE NEW YORK TIMES

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'COMPETING IDEOLOGIES'

*D. Wigmore Fine Art, 730 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan,
Through Sept. 12, 2008*

It's the populists versus the elitists. "Competing Ideologies" takes us back to a time when the choice between representation and abstraction was loaded with moral, spiritual and political import. The selection of almost 60 works on paper by about 30 representationalists and abstractionists is uneven, but the show as a whole is an interesting take on the values driving American art in the 1930s and '40s.

The Social Realists and the American Scene painters wanted to speak to a broad audience about issues that ordinary working people could relate to. Ben Shahn's large gouache depicting a welder for a labor union poster and Daniel Ralph Celentano's watercolor paintings of men working on fighter planes in a Long Island aircraft plant raise some of the most urgent issues of the day in a language anyone could understand.

Works like Dale Nichols's small, precise watercolor paintings of Midwestern farms and Doris Lee's sweet, cartoonish pencil drawing of a man and woman harvesting corn proffer a touching nostalgia for America's agrarian past. And Reginald Marsh's watercolor pictures of the New York City skyline above the Hudson River convey a vivid experience of the empirical present.

As for the abstractionists, they wanted art to explore the frontiers of aesthetic and expressive possibility without regard for the understanding of the uninitiated. Rolph Scarlett's futuristic composition of circles and rectangles, "Nuances in Gray and Beige," envisions a metaphysical space of Platonic essences. With its curvy, gestural passages and Cubist structural background, Werner Drewes's brush and ink drawing "A-295" asserts a lively interplay of form and feeling.

In Charles Green Shaw's collages consisting of newspaper headlines, painted circles and finely inked lines, the popular and the esoteric collide. And in a small painting of ladderlike structures in black, red and blue on a white square, Burgoyne Diller follows in the footsteps of his uncompromising master, [Piet Mondrian](#).

KEN JOHNSON

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