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Louisa Chase's new paintings are the most challenging she has done. They are almost entirely abstract. Drawing and color are now almost split. With a palette knife and the handle end of a brush, lines have been scratched and scribbled in creamy all-white fields laid over all-black grounds. In each painting, there are relatively small red, yellow and blue rectangles or squares. The struggle between peace and restlessness, wildness and order, free expression and deliberate construction, exists in a purer, more distilled state than in anything Ms. Chase painted before.

One key to what the artist is after can be found in the apparent dialogue between East and West. In one painting, the rising and falling lines suggest the cliffs and peaks of Chinese landscapes. The blocks of color accompanying them suggest a city skyline. Two different approaches - one rural, freewheeling and intuitive, the other urban and architectural - are present. The painting is an attempt to acknowledge their independence and yet make them inseparable.

Ms. Chase sets up lines of demarcation, then blurs figure and ground. For example, the black lines dominating all the paintings are not drawn on the surface; they result from incisions into the whiteness that expose the black ground underneath. The rectangles and squares, which are applied to the surface, are translucent, which means they call as much attention to the drawing behind them as they do to their own structural roles. When the rectangles and squares are incised as well, clear distinctions between the three different layers of the painting and the three different colors (white, black and either red, blue or yellow) collapse.

The drawing is wonderfully controlled and suggestive. The scratched lines are like grass, hair, hills, or eyes and faces. Sometimes the lines huddle together like a clump of trees; sometimes they spread out like floating mountains. The boxes of color are evocative, too, stretching out like ledges or diving boards, or opening up like windows or the scaffoldings of Franz Kline. These are hard paintings to leave. There is a sense that they hold the answer to something that is a matter of life and death. Robin Hill Lang & O'Hara Gallery 568 Broadway (at Prince Street) Through March 4