

Return of the Blob

**Linda Besemer has managed
to obliterate the canvas completely**

BY DEIDRE STEIN GREBEN

Studying at Maine's Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in the summer of 1981, Linda Besemer received a visit from the Abstract Expressionist painter Milton Resnick. "He

been painting large narratives of figures engaged in everyday pursuits. "At the time, nobody cared about my stories. That day, I realized I could find the answer in the paint itself."



floppy sheet of colors that she then drapes over a rod like a dishcloth or lets spill onto the floor and buckle in smooth, horizontal folds.

Although Besemer's works are sculptural, she hangs them on the wall. "I wanted them to still read in the two-dimensional realm," she explains. She also wanted to make painting visible in a way that "understood its complicated history"—meaning, a way that questioned the fundamental relationship of gesture and ground.

In accomplishing her objective, Besemer, who wears her brown hair tightly cropped and sports tortoiseshell-framed glasses, also dealt with issues relating to her own history. "I understood my paintings weren't feminist, but I was," says the Indiana native, who graduated from Indiana State University and received her master's degree from Philadelphia's Tyler School of Art. In 1987, after several years of trying to survive as a painter in New York, she moved to Los Angeles and took a job teaching studio classes and women's studies courses at Occidental College. "At the time, I wondered why feminist artists loathed the gesture," she says. "To them, the action of the brushstroke signified virility and conquest. The canvas was the ground, the object, to be conquered. I felt I had to resolve this relationship in my own work."

The path leading to Besemer's peeled paintings began in the late 1980s, when she started dividing her works into two sections. She also played with the painting's overall shape—changing the conventional hard-edge rec-



Quad Square #5, 2004,
one of Besemer's works made entirely of acrylic paint.

pointed to an odd-shaped blob on my palette and said, enigmatically, 'You need to make something this good,'" recalls the 48-year-old Besemer, who had

Besemer applies layers of acrylic to glass or plastic, forming long, even stripes and bold plaids. Once the pigment is dry, she peels it off, producing a thick,

tangular field to a circular one. But “the most striking thing about the paintings,” she says of the canvases and their elongated, serpentine marks, “was the gestures themselves.”

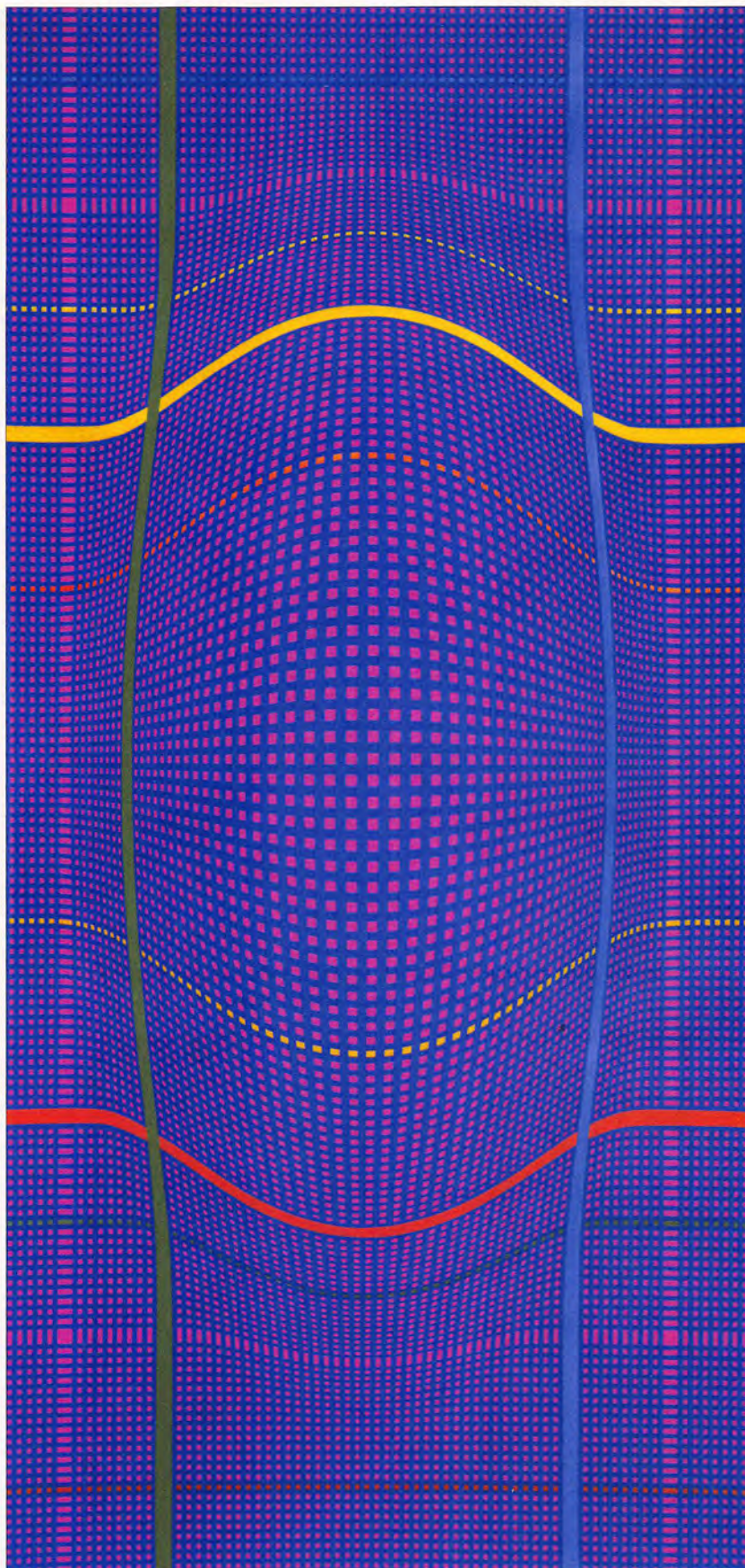
By the mid-1990s, Besemer began to detach the initially monochromatic brushstrokes from easel-size panes of glass. Today she works with much bigger sheets—as large as 8 by 16 feet—or expanses of polyethylene, garbage-bag plastic, stapled tightly to the wall. On these she paints her compositions by putting down the thinnest lines first, instead of rendering the background and then building on it. Over time, her early efforts, painted with a big squeegee, turned, as she saw it, into perfect distillations of the gesture.

One day, in a fit of frustration, Besemer flung one of her less-than-perfect results across her studio. Accidentally, it slipped over a metal bar, exposing its front and back simultaneously. In works such as *Fold Quadrant #5* (2001), where the section closer to the wall hangs lower over the dowel to reveal its underside, a complex network of horizontal and vertical bands align and misalign, underscoring the painting’s two-sided surface. “By sliding the painting off the canvas, I’m resisting the limitations of its historical form,” she explains.

While Besemer’s inspirations include 1960s Op art and industrial designers, and more specifically, Mondrian’s grids and Newman’s zips, her newest works—recently on view at New York’s Cohan and Leslie gallery, where her art sells for between \$10,000 and \$45,000—refer to Italy’s Baroque architecture. On a visit to Rome in 2002, Besemer was struck by how a small chapel could feel big: how it was restricted yet gave the illusion of being expansive. She pursues a similar effect in her “bulge” pieces, in which localized areas of the flat, plasticky, gridded sheets appear to jut out like swollen goose bumps.

Besemer, whose work will be included in the group show “Extreme Abstraction,” at Buffalo’s Albright-Knox Art Gallery from July 15 to October 16, also emphasizes the colors in her work, opting for hyped-up hues like royal blue, sunny yellow, hot pink, and lime green. “Color itself is fabulous,” she says. “I’m affirming what painting is about, instead of critiquing.” ■

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Single Bulge Sheet No. 8, 2004,
recalls Op art from the 1960s.