Is she putting new wine in old bottles or old wine in new bottles? Whichever it is (and I suspect it's a sleight that encompasses both), Lee Sherry is busy with her funnel. The strange sensation immediate upon seeing a painting by Sherry is that the painting might have come out of any far-off century and probably out of a place like Samarkand.

In the current tug-of-war between abstraction and figuration, Sherry staunchly insists she is an abstractionist. She avers that her figures do not represent literal or anecdotal things, but rather are rich forms against which the imagination knocks. Yet dipping the paws of her pet cat in paint and then loosing the animal upon a painting-in-progress seems the height of tangible realism to me. And fortuitous too, the cluster of shapes which comprise a paw resembles a flower bud. Her cat steps in to save Sherry the work of painting a bouquet.

Certainly Sherry began as a plain and simple abstractionist. Yet even then, her "broken grid" had an exotic air. She limited her palette to a deep green and a brick red. Most frequently, slashed red lines cross in rude Xs on green fields. There is the tendency to perceive depth, as though the crossing lines overlapped, overhanging a pathway. The perspective is not consistent, and the lines might also be read as marks sitting atop a hard field.

Sherry coaxing great variety out of this scheme. A signal of change was Cafe Centrale of 1981. Here the field is a brighter, almost emerald green, and the welter of lines is a host of colors. Barely perceptible in the field is a shimmering shape like a toboggan. In this context it's an Arabic letter. Sherry lived for two years in Morocco and this charged painting hints at wider concerns.

Sherry describes her expanding compass quite matter-of-factly: "I had been concerned with activating the ground. After a while it got so activated it got identity." One of the first declarations of the new breadth was a circle like a globe or planet. This shape usually emerges out of some sort of depicted upheaval or conflagration. Sometimes it is caught in a web of language-like signs; at other times it's elongated like an egg. When you give birth to the world—and Sherry evokes a kaleidoscope of references—invention organically follows invention.

"My technique gives me access to my influence," says Sherry. She uses black oil, a Renaissance recipe, to give her paintings their hoary look. And she's a shameless borrower from other cultures. In particular, she's a tracer of templates. Sherry has a menagerie of wooden animals that make the designs on Indian textiles. One template resembles an arch-shaped grave marker and lends the look of ancient tablets.

For Sherry, painting is an exercise of the imagination, but because of her handiwork methods, painting is also craft. One of her arch-shaped paintings is about the size of a sign to be hung above a doorway. The painter Jake Berthot suggested she hang it outside her studio as a proclamation that the enterprise of painting is occurring there.

Over and above the crafted look and feel is the sensation that the work hasn't been made, but summoned. Sherry is like a 19th-century Symbolist, knowingly working with universally potent shapes, conjoining various of them, and observing what happens formally, but above all, associatively. The Symbolists wished to go "anywhere out of the world," and although Sherry's elements (especially the cat who is helping to lower the unemployment rate) are very real, even mundane, the real ground of her work is the slightly askew ethereal plane. We know the work is fabricated, but that lends it little actuality. It is a richly confabulated presentation.

Like Julian Schnabel, Sherry is able to incorporate anything her heart desires into her painting in the face of the risk that she might babble into banality. She has staved off that by knowing how to regulate the temperature and the speed. There are rapid, eccentric mixes and slow evocations of single images. Lee Sherry's mostly portable paintings are like smelling salts picked up along the Spice Route; they can rouse an art world gone drowsy. (Nielsen, Boston, November 13-December 11)

William Zimmer

Lee Sherry, Chuleta Urdu, 1982. Oil on linen, 60 x 40". Courtesy Nielsen Gallery.

LEE SHERRY

Arts magazine, c. 1983