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art

MUSEUMS • GALLERIES

Galileo served as this painter's muse

By Victoria Donohoe
FOR THE INQUIRER

Michael Morrill, a prominent Pittsburgh abstract painter, is introduced at Seraphin Gallery in his first Philadelphia solo. A teacher of studio art at the University of Pittsburgh, the Yale-trained Morrill became an artist when the reductive aesthetic of the 1970s, not the more austere minimalism of the 1960s, was emerging and combining itself with painterly enrichment — something that characterizes his distinctive handling of this method. I'd say Morrill keeps half a foot in the reductive camp, while his paintings emphasize their expressive option with brilliance.

In "Dawn and Dusk," featuring two series of works inspired by Galileo's moon drawings, Morrill is especially aware of the tension between light and dark as well as the transitory nature of shadow, some of it deep. His canvases are

actually composites of hundreds of small, narrow strips of linen laid side-by-side horizontally, attached to backing, and painted with multilayered pigment, each application sanded to give depth.

On close inspection, such abstract paintings are tense with textured involvement along otherwise flat surfaces and along straight-line edges — a reminder that Morrill had training as a sculptor. But if we pull back, there's almost an elimination of such detail as we see his overall effort to contain paint juiciness and keep it within bounds. Twin paintings are plentiful, their dominant bright contrasting colors usually well-balanced. Other successful paintings are those that transpose the dark or light color drawn to the sanded surface; such handling can soften and lubricate any dryness in color.

And while Morrill is no "early modernist" seeking spirituality in



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abstract art, he is having a go at exploring mysteries of the moon, of divinity and various philosophies with his paintbrush, always

remembering, too, to scrape beneath surfaces. An unusual and compelling show — yours to explore as well.

Seraphin Gallery, 1108 Pine St. To Feb. 19. Wed-Sun 11-6. 215-923-7000.