

Anxiety invades calm of Staprans' still lifes, abstract work

Raimonds Staprans may never step out of the shadow of Wayne Thiebaud, but does he belong there?

Probably not, on the evidence of the choppy 50-year survey of his work at the Hackett-Freedman Gallery.

A painting such as "Sunshine Chair" (1983) can account for the association of Staprans' work and Thiebaud's, along with the fact that both live in Northern California.

Like many of Thiebaud's still lifes, "Sunshine Chair" evokes a light so intense that it sizzles around the contours of things, making their edges appear to quaver. But where Thiebaud's manner produces caricatures of perception, Staprans interrogates forms for their power to stage a mood of calm corroded by anxiety.

Staprans claims not to rely on observation, unlike Thiebaud, but to develop even his most apparently referential paintings by improvisation. Bear down on a picture such as "Sunshine Chair," and you believe him.

The chair's proportions look like a product of guesswork. Descriptively meaningless bands of color crisscross beneath and within the unconvincing shadow

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Raimonds Staprans: Fifty Years: Paintings. Through Sept. 2. Hackett-Freedman Gallery, 250 Sutter St., San Francisco. (415) 362-7152, www.hackettfreedman.com.

the chair casts. But get too comfortable viewing "Sunshine Chair" as a color-field painting in figurative clothing, and the black background will assert itself as an existential abyss.

Such a reading detects the European sensibility at the heart of Staprans' work. His teachers, after his immigration from Latvia to America, included Alexander Archipenko and Mark Tobey. But the early works on view more readily bring Nicholas de Stael to mind: see late '60s Staprans pictures such as "Red Sky" and "Winter Landscape."

With "The Forest" (1969), a near abstraction, Staprans briefly,

perhaps unrepeatably, found a singular voice.

Save some attention for this haunting snowbound nightscape, no matter what time you give to the rest of the exhibition. Nowhere else in the present selection of work do all the forces Staprans puts in play come together so effectively. "The Forest" — try matching its title to its content — expresses the tragic vision behind Staprans' art with a material elegance and chilly ambiguity that have mostly eluded him since.

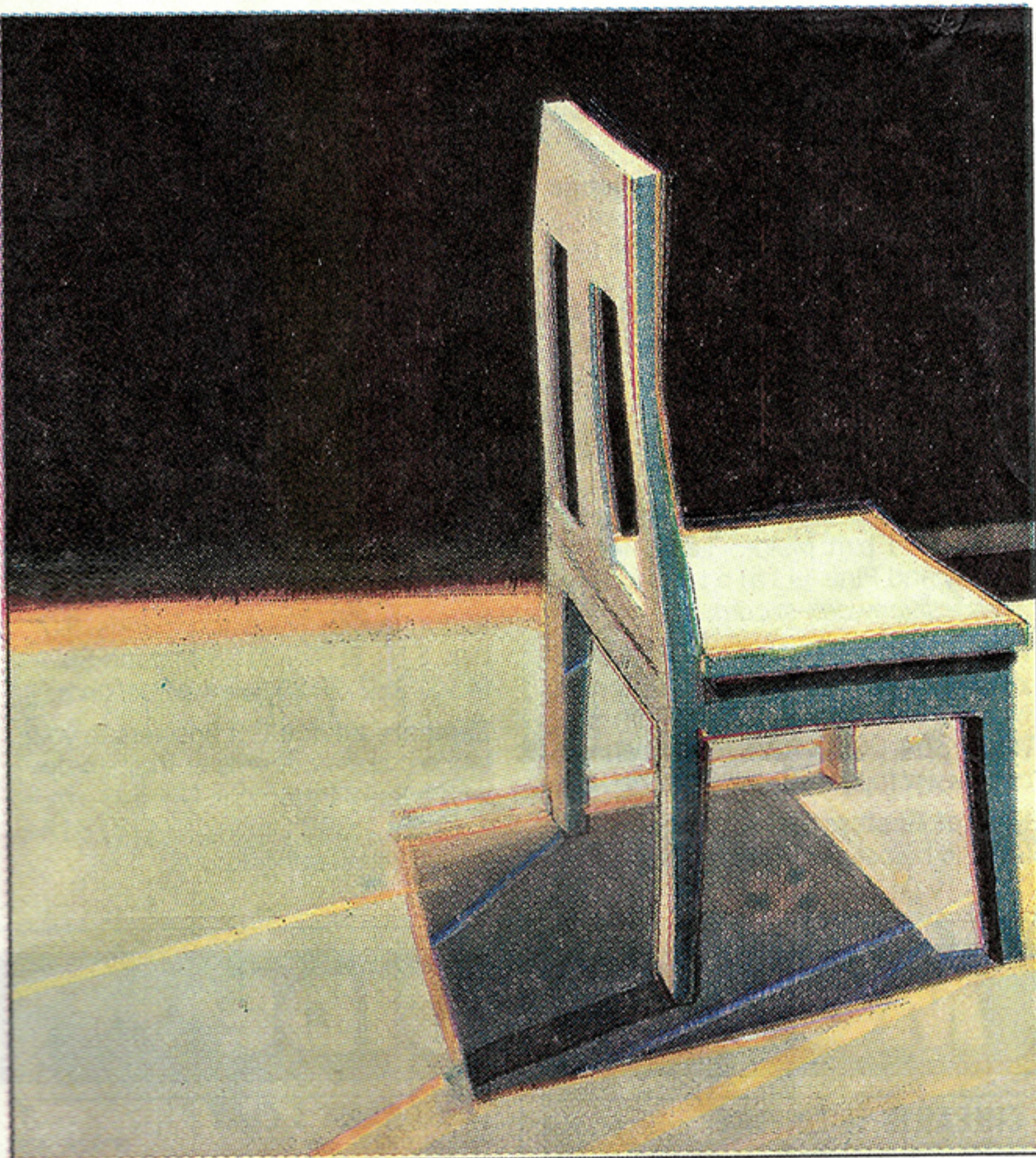
The dark vision implicit in "The Forest" surfaces less persuasively in much of Staprans'

later work. But that picture does encourage us to see the bright light in his work not as a promise of redeeming illumination but the opposite: an attempt to generate a dark, forbidding after-image, both optical and psychological.

This effort proves itself only occasionally, as in "The Sunshine Table #3" (1989-99), where the paint-speckled black table top suddenly opens a glimpse of merciless interstellar space to the eye unwarily inspecting the mundane fiction of a piece of furniture. The same menacing cosmic void appears to pulse behind the smooth blue planes of "Bend of the River" (2006), distancing it from obvious associations with Thiebaud and Richard Diebenkorn.

Hackett-Freedman has done Staprans no favor by including figure paintings such as "The Scream" (1982) and "Actor Wearing the Mask of Superiority" (1975). These clumsy inventions may represent a significant portion of Staprans' output, but studying them will revoke whatever confidence in the painter his uninhabited pictures inspire.

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Photos by J.W. WHITE / Hackett-Freedman Gallery

"Sunshine Chair" (above), by Raimonds Staprans, and "Red Sky" (right) are on display at the Hackett-Freedman Gallery.

