



Eric Niebuhr, *This Is a Lonely Place*, 2001,  
acrylic on canvas on panel, 70 x 90".

## ERIC NIEBUHR GOLDMAN TEVIS

Fooling around with spiritual imagery is tricky business. When it comes to the eternal, the cosmic, and the infinite, many of us are sure only that we aren't sure about its status in our lives, let alone in art, so we tend to like our doses of the spiritual served up with encoded directions. Is it the work of a true believer, a conflicted soul, an individual with a quest, a skeptic, a cynic? What's the message and what's the spin? When the artist's intentions are clearly reflected, they can take the place of our own muddled reading.

In his first solo show in Los Angeles, Eric Niebuhr (no relation to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr) offered acrylic paintings (all 2001) that don't let us off so easily. The images, though heavily distilled and abstracted, hint at various references—some religious, some not—but only rarely divulge obvious themes or narratives. The long-haired fellow striding across a pale blue field in *This Is a Lonely Place* could be an actor in front of a blue screen, a hippie walking on clouds, a pilgrim traversing a snow field, or Jesus walking on water.

Likewise, the pinkish glow almost

palpably pushing into the dark space of *It Came Through* might represent a luminous television at night, an alien presence beaming aboard the Starship Enterprise, a scene of resurrection, or Gabriel showing up at Mary's door. The paintings seem just as likely to derive from everyday life, popular media, psychedelia, or sci-fi as from religious sources, as the implication of some sort of heightened or mystical experience here seems the result more of a shared sensibility among the works than evidence of particular conventions or codes. With their emphasis on atmosphere and luminosity, their strange sense of placelessness, and their depiction of events and interactions that are compelling and seemingly specific yet ultimately undeducible and irreducible, the paintings draw the viewer into the same sort of head space one occupies when dealing with spiritual concerns.

The field of color that forms the background of each painting is board-flat physically and visually, but the elements in the images vary in their actual and perceptual presence—sometimes flat yet appearing to push forward from or through the surface, sometimes densely massed, poured on in small, thick, pigment-laden areas that individually look like dull jewels or candy but together form moments of quasi representation. Evoking the spiritual via plastic surfaces, decorator colors, and stylistic variants of Pop, postpainterly abstraction, Color Field painting, and the "new" abstraction, not to mention television, movies, and video and computer games, might suggest a strategy of irony—pairing the shallow with the deep, the appropriated with the genuine, the stylish

with that which is beyond style. Then again, these may be an early indication of what twenty-first-century spiritual painting looks like—painting that addresses the medium (including itself) as well as the message and that invites mixed readings rooted in viewers' own beliefs, biases, and faith or lack thereof in popular culture and media, spirituality, art, and painting. In all of Niebuhr's work, these issues remain unresolved, though the paintings themselves do not. On the contrary, they are sensually rewarding, visually intriguing, stylistically fresh, and subtly able to raise nagging questions, which is why they seem so potentially resonant with viewers from the most doubtful to the most devout.

—Christopher Miles