At Lehman Gallery, Getting a Feel for the Abstract

It goes without saying that abstraction was prominent in 20th-century art. From early modern movements like De Stijl and Suprematism to Abstract Expressionism, artists experimented with the possibilities inherent in nonrepresentational imagery.

These days, the pendulum of fashion has swung back toward figuration. Then there is the popularity of new media, especially film and video. But two exhibitions at Lehman College Art Gallery remind us that wonderful abstract art is still being made.

One show is by the Brazilian artist Elizabeth Jobim, the other by Tony Bechara, an American. There is little linking their work, beyond an enthusiasm for irregular geometry. Both artists make paintings that are never entirely what they seem to be.

"Elizabeth Jobim: Endless Lines" is a single, site-specific installation. The work consists of two dozen massive painted canvases placed side by side along the walls of the main gallery. Painted blue lines and geometric forms blend from one canvas to the next, creating a kind of architectural environment that envelops the viewer.

Ms. Jobim is influenced by music—partly, no doubt, because she is the daughter of the bossa nova musician Antonio Carlos Jobim. It is clearly visible in her work here, with her alternating combinations of thick and thin lines and volumetric geometric forms frequently resembling musical notes arranged on a page.

Ms. Jobim uses ultramarine blue paint rapidly applied with rollers to the canvas. Up close the pictures look unevenly painted, with spots and stains and shifting levels of luminosity. But stand back and the varying surface textures and saturation of the paint create a sense of undulating rhythm; the lines begin to vibrate.

It is always tempting to look for representational imagery in abstract art. Ms. Jobim’s paintings can remind you not just of music scores but also of an urban skyline or even the outline of industrial machinery. Yet fundamentally, this installation is all about relationships of space, line and form. It is classic geometric abstraction.

Geometric abstraction is also the basis of Mr. Bechara’s work, which is based on a grid structure. But he gives it a twist, creating the illusion of rapid movement and depth through fields of tiny squares of colors in ever-so-subtle variations. The end results are optical paintings that convincingly suggest pixilated television imagery.

The large-scale triptych “Grand Canyon” (2007) is the centerpiece of the Lehman exhibition. It is an impressive work, though perhaps not shown to its best advantage here in a low-ceilinged room of relatively little light. Part of the beauty and allure of this kind of optical art is the way in which the surface patterns catch and reflect light.

But no matter, for the picture is pretty amazing. Standing in front of “Grand Canyon,” you immediately feel small, confronted with a vast, contemplative panorama in a limited range of colors—black, white and several dozen extraordinarily subtle shades of gray. It is like lying on your back in a field at night and staring up at the stars.

The exhibition also includes Mr. Bechara’s "Geometry and Color" (2008), an installation of three smaller shaped canvases—a circle, a rectangle and a triangle—all covered in the artist’s signature, pixel-like squares. These canvases are more colorful and ornate, with patterning that suggests motifs used in fabric and interior design dating back to the 1960s.

At the same time, the surface texture is rough and uneven. Look closely and you will notice paint pooled in places. Colors also seem to fuse. While Mr. Bechara’s method is based on a rigid geometry, the overall effect is much more organic. His little squares of paint are reminiscent of tesserae, the squares of stone or glass used in making mosaics.

Distractors often say that abstraction is maddeningly oblique. On a literal level they are right, for most abstract art doesn’t mean or say anything in particular. But these paintings by Mr. Bechara and Ms. Jobim remind us there are other ways in which abstraction can be appreciated. It is not so much about thinking, as looking and feeling.