

## AROUND THE GALLERIES

# Banal ideas give way to great art

By DAVID PAGEL  
Special to The Times

Roy Lichtenstein's abstract paintings at Gagosian Gallery offer an eloquent argument against the seemingly sensible idea that great art comes from great ideas. Just the opposite is true of the Pop artist's "Perfect and Imperfect" series, which begins with an idea so simplistic that it can only be described as dumb.

The exhibition's 14 canvases and 20 drawings follow the same recipe. Start with a rectangle, either horizontal or vertical. Pick a point on its perimeter and draw a diagonal line to another side. Without picking up your pencil, do this again. And again and again, from five to 12 times. The last line must take you back to the starting point.

Then fill in most of the spaces between the lines. Use solid colors, diagonal stripes or dots.

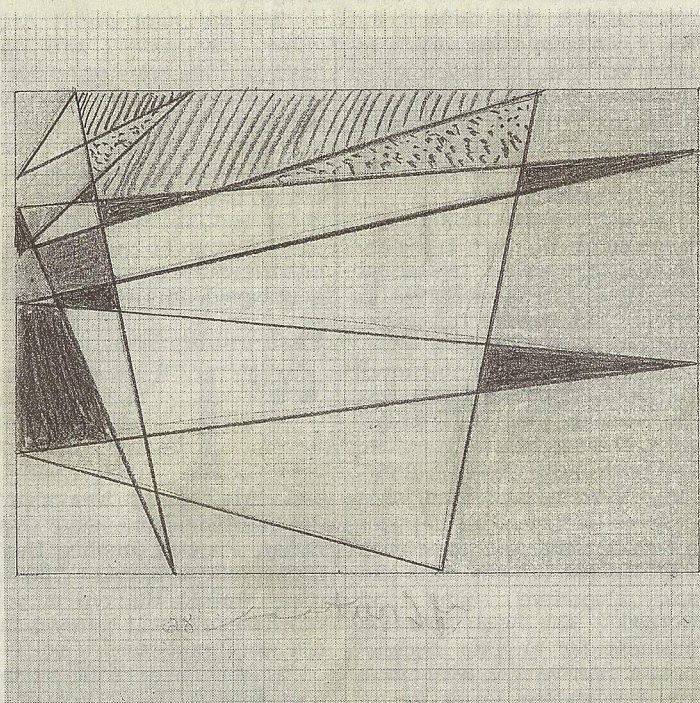
The only difference between

Lichtenstein's "Perfect" and "Imperfect" works is that the latter include a triangle or two that extend beyond the edge of the original rectangle. This little gesture transforms an ordinary four-sided canvas into a shaped painting. It also suggests that Lichtenstein (1923-1997) got carried away — that his ricocheting pencil went too fast to stop before breaking out of the image.

That's an illusion. These paintings are among the most controlled of his exceptionally deliberate oeuvre. He made three in 1978; the rest are from 1986-88. (Nearly all were borrowed from the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation and are not for sale.) They embody such a surplus of linear mastery, coloristic nuance and formal refinement that they turn a dumb idea into a springboard to experiences of joyous exuberance.

There's nothing unsophisticated about the pleasures they deliver. In many, buoyancy, verve and clarity pirouette around each other, bouncing your eye around the picture plane with more animated energy than a movie jam-packed with special effects.

To see Lichtenstein's drawings (made with colored pencils on ordinary sheets of graph paper) alongside his paintings is to



Gagosian Gallery

**ON LINE:** Roy Lichtenstein's "Drawing for Perfect Painting," 1986, is one of his abstracts on display at Gagosian Gallery.

see his mind in action. Designs are refined, compositions balanced and contrasts sharpened. Only a handful of his studies match the paintings executed from them. The rest reveal changes he made as he trans-

lated his dynamic patterns from paper to canvas, adjusting the thickness of a line, altering the color of a triangle or shifting the angle of a shape's edge.

There's a flexibility to his art that suggests he loves rules for

the exceptions they make possible. One of the most fascinating pieces is one of the "Perfect" paintings, made of sheets of patterned fabric he stitched together. It's the only one in which Lichtenstein's line changes direction in the middle of the image, not once but twice. In three others, a gentle arc appears, throwing a curve of relaxation into the otherwise straightforward geometry.

In a newly expanded upstairs gallery (designed by Richard Meier & Partners) stands a small sculpture. Bringing Lichtenstein's acrobatic lines off the wall and into the same space viewers occupy, this piece of steel punctuates a magnificent exhibition by looking as if it, too, is about to make a gravity-defying leap.

**Gagosian Gallery**, 456 N. Camden Drive, Beverly Hills, (310) 271-9400, through Dec. 7. Closed Sundays and Mondays.