

New Territories In Painting

The Uncomfortable Armchair : Abstraction and Decoration, by Richard Kalina
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The loss of wholeness is a common modern complaint. From the Haussmannization of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century to the dizzying proliferation of computer networks in the late twentieth, the old unities and certainties seem to be in a state of continual unravelling. But where there is a force there is generally a counterforce. There is of course the force of political rhetoric: the desire to return to what is perceived of as the completeness and stability of the past is a feature of both the conservative and the various Arcadian positions. Culture too acts to replace unstable social rationales with ones that appear to be more enduring. An example was the popular reaction to Freudian psychology. It was embraced (in varying degrees) as the new explanation for the irrational behavior that seemed to animate so much of modern life. In the common imagination there seemed to be a one-to-one mapping of the conscious onto the unconscious. Discontent and dismay were redefined as illnesses and illness could, in the mechanistic modern world-view, be cured. A psychoanalytic guide might be needed, but with enough work one could find the right correspondences and be made whole again. Instead of being lost and outmoded, irrelevant to the difficulties of today, the past (and particularly childhood – that repository of remembered oneness) was lifted out of nostalgia and given a causal, meaningful place in life. The past had, so to speak, a job.

In art, modernism, especially abstraction, served a similar stabilizing function. At first glance this would seem odd. Wasn't modernism a paradigm of the chaotic modern world, a form always in revolt, the presenter of the distressingly novel? Modernism may have been radical, but "radical" comes from the Latin, "radix" or root, and there is in the radical a desire to cut through the thickets of irrelevance and return to the basics: to be pure. The search for purity in modernism is something not restricted to the Platonic reductiveness of Suprematism or Minimalism. Even Futurism, the noisiest of early modern movements, was in search of the delirious, visceral clarity of the perpetually new, of speed absolute and uncorrupted.

Purity implies control, and abstraction has been especially susceptible to the self-imposition of governing strategies, theories, and explanations. In the absence of a directly comprehensible ordering subject matter (other than art historical positioning) abstraction has had to order itself. No matter how seemingly arbitrary the painting was, its parts had to subordinate themselves to a unified central vision. That vision might be in varying degrees, formal, psychological, spiritual, epistemological, phenomenological, or perceptual; but no matter what the ordering was, the totality and unity of the painting was maintained – there might be subtexts, but essentially the work of art told one story.

Stories are interesting for what they don't say as well as for what they do, and the thread that has been notably missing for most of this century has been that of beauty. What of course has not been lacking has been the other side of the traditional coin, the Sublime. It is not that twentieth century art is unattractive – far from it – but Beauty with a capital B, the Apollonian, has seemed too weak a binding agent for the modernist work of art. The Dionysian Sublime has been the force designed to carry painting away from the depiction of awe-inspiring subject matter into more self-contained but equally powerful realms. The invocation and evocation of the primitive, of the transcendent self, of mystery, scale and dissonance has given modernist art a gravitas it did not have by right. Beauty was, if anything, an afterthought – an attribute that might be appended after time, but not something that one actively strove for. Picasso's paradigmatically modernist *Les Femmes d'Alger* might seem beautiful to us, but its beauty comes from the completeness and daring of the concept; it is an aspect integral to the entire picture, a function of its harshness and audacity, of its power.

Compared to the Rose Period paintings of a few years earlier this is clearly the case. Those mal-de-siècle paintings with their elongated Mannerist figures, their self-conscious technical virtuosity, and their air of illness and melancholy eroticism are another thing altogether. Beauty seems very much the point here. There is a hothouse feeling to them, and the term is apt, for a hothouse is a area where plants can be taken aside, grown out of season, examined. The beauty in a Rose Period Picasso is excessive. It stands apart, sign-like, from the painting.

This sense of separation, analysis, and excess lies at the heart of what I believe the decorative means in late twentieth century art. The loss of wholeness is still being felt, but the response is now different. The binding unity of abstraction, nearly a century in the making, is no longer viable, and with it has gone the Sublime; for the Sublime is ultimately an abstracted expression of will, of the individual. "Form follows function" is not just an overworn phrase – it is a key to modernism. "Form follows function" implies necessity: the work of art is that which is needed and nothing more. There is no excess baggage. There is, instead, unity, wholeness, hierarchy, centrality, originality, and the integrated ego of the least reducible of social units – the individual.

But what has come in its place? For abstraction there has developed a new form of pictorial organization, a syntactical order. The cohesiveness of the painting has been disrupted: its various parts have achieved an independence. They operate in relation to each other not by necessity but by contingency. Things move and shift: the painting becomes a screen, a flattened arena where things provisionally coalesce, held in place by their function in a fugitive grammatical schema. In this sort of painting, beauty is not some vaguely intuited harmony which knits the work together; rather it is a separate entity, something that has achieved the same self-sufficiency as, say, line, color, texture, gesture, or historical reference. This autonomous beauty, this independent and clearly recognizable quality is that which we may call the decorative.

What has been created is content freed from containment. The syntactical parts of the painting have become information, and a painting the representation of that information. There is an analogue to this in the larger culture – the Internet. Earlier self-contained informational structures have been fragmented. Their wholeness has been broken, but instead of chaos and weakness, a new dispersed structure of a different and greater strength has been created. It is loose, transparent, overlapping, able to be summoned up from the outside, and then returned. There are narrative possibilities, but for a free-floating, unpredictable hypertext narration, narration separated from the mechanistic structures of cause and effect. (This dispersed narrative has a connection to classical notions of the decorative – that is the flattened disposition of color over the surface of the painting to create pictorial unity; as opposed to the creation of logical, hierarchical space through the use of perspectival systems and tonal modeling.)

Narration of a particular sort has long been an important aspect of the decorative arts – the decorative arts, not the decorative in painting. Things however are changing. The narration I am referring to is a displaced narration, for in an ornamented object the ornament is always telling a different story than the object. The ornamentation painted on a Greek vase or incised into a Chinese pot, for example, has only a tenuous connection to the shape of that vase or pot, and virtually none to its use. These various stories become mapped onto each other, but in doubled, misregistered, hybrid ways. The object is, in a deep sense, operating at cross-purposes to itself. This is why decorative objects lack the traditional unity of what we call high art. Parenthetically, this is the quality which separates Frank Stella's early black, silver, and copper series paintings from the decorative forms that they recall: there is no disjunction between the internal and external formats – only one story is being told.

The structural discordance of decoration can be seen clearly in architectural ornamentation. Traditionally such ornamentation is a correction of scale – it counters the large mass of the building and echoes the size and the human activity of its inhabitants. Ornamented buildings, a Louis Sullivan skyscraper from the early twentieth century, and Charles Garnier's Paris Opera from the nineteenth, for example, share this characteristic. Ornament, by its nature, separates itself from that which is being ornamented. In recent architecture this separation and attendant excess has been underlined. In postmodern buildings by Robert Venturi and Michael Graves – the Institute for Scientific Information in Philadelphia and the Portland Building in Portland, Oregon, for example – reasonably simple structures have been embellished by self-consciously complex decoration, creating, in Venturi's words, "decorated sheds." In Paris, Jean Nouvel's Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art symbolically detaches the great glass facade, putting it in front of the garden; thus breaking the building's unity, turning outside into inside, structure into ornament, and in the process

giving us, as decoration does, a finely tuned pleasure. Pleasure of this nature is a key element of the decorative. Since the decorative is founded on disjunction, it is particularly susceptible to wit and irony, forms of humor based on subtly disruptive situations. Thus Venturi and Frank Gehry are witty architects, and Mies van der Rohe and Rietveld are not; just as Philip Taaffe is a witty painter and Anselm Kiefer the farthest from one.

The pleasure of decoration comes not just from controlled discordance but from controlled excess as well. The classic Mondrians of the twenties are finely honed unities: nothing more is needed. But in the thirties and forties, when lines became doubled, when unbounded color blocks were added years after the paintings were finished, and when the jazzy, sensual Broadway Boogie-Woogie and Victory Boogie-Woogie were painted, even Mondrian became decorative.

Minimalism too, in spite of its courting of the Sublime and its desire for wholeness and totality, has often operated in the realm of the decorative. The strictness of Minimalism sets up a situation that begs for transgression, for the unified read to be broken. When Donald Judd inserts a liner of lustrous purple Plexiglas into an open brass cube or when Dan Flavin bathes a room with washes of glowing, subtly colored light, rigid logic and unity are overturned and beauty separates itself out to stand alongside structure, material, and concept.

Minimalism is also given to the decorative impulse because of its repudiation of the overtly personal. In abstraction the personal untempered by irony has devolved into a sign for the self, for the individual – a metaphor for the autonomy and unity of the painting. Brice Marden's earlier minimal paintings, for example, with their slow, sensual wax surfaces are more decorative (and to my mind, successful) than his later gestural work. That work is earnest, elegant (yet clumsy enough to read as "authentic") and basically says nothing that was not said forty years before.

For abstraction to be a stand-in for the artist, a one-to-one mapping of consciousness onto canvas, implies a dated romanticism, a sense of the heroic (usually male) artist pitted in struggle ~usually doomed) against a resistant world or that metaphor for the world, the canvas. When stated this way, this construct appears obvious and trite, the stuff of movies. Artists aren't really like that, and yet this rhetorical stance, modified to be a bit more believable, is still one that commands attention. Pleasure, wit, playfulness, and beauty – more feminine characteristics, and more indicative of the decorative – are harder sells. They are elements of course of the "personal", but the personal of a lesser order. They do not set the proper example.

What has not been dealt with overtly in recent years is the ostensible moral nature of abstraction: a subject previously held in great regard. If abstraction represents the individual, then that abstraction presumably shares the same moral and ethical attributes as its creator (as well as its ideal viewer). A great moral virtue in America is masculine self-reliance. Is it so strange then that Clement Greenberg's prescription for painting should be one of formal autonomy and self-determination? (The high moral tone of abstraction is not entirely gone – the title of last Spring's large abstraction show at the Guggenheim Museum was *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline*; a phrase taken from a woman, Eva Hesse, but still in the holier-than-thou, existentialist tough guy mode.)

To move away from supposed independence and singularity, to create painting which is layered, and complex – doubled and blurred by irony, misregistration, calculation, repetition, and reference – is to court dependence, to be caught up and potentially lost in the wider web of information and interrelations. It is to court the feminine, the non-rigid, the adaptive, the decorative: it is to look for a different sort of strength.

This search is bound to produce uneasiness, for abstraction, particularly after the Second World War, has been given a large weight to carry. To disperse its energies, to lose focus and seriousness, would be, ostensibly, to lose its integrity and relevance. The problem is, it is already doing just that. Traditional abstraction has forfeited the high ground, if there is such a thing anymore. It seems clear enough that if "important" issues are supposedly being addressed, then the public is likely to look to someone on the order of Damien Hirst, a showman able to package simple-minded ideas with cinematic panache. It is, however, very

difficult to let go of the expected, of business as usual. The academic, after all, only seems academic in retrospect.

A new formulation of the decorative abstract requires not just reconfiguration of present art, but also a re-examination of the past. Recent large-scale exhibitions of Matisse, Mondrian, and the Fauves cannot fail to have a subtle but real effect on current practice – to present in a contemporary context and en masse, work of such undeniable intellectual and visceral appeal inevitably changes both the viewer and that which is being viewed.

The more recent past calls for a new examination as well. The decorative and disjunctive aspects of Minimalism should be explored, as well as areas where an obsessive methodology creates a longing for wholeness and congruity that is impossible to achieve and where the gap between desire and execution creates a highly charged zone of both anxiety and pleasure. In this regard I am thinking of the black paintings of Ad Reinhardt, Roman Opalka and his numberings to infinity, Al Held's proto-cyberspace perspectival excesses, and the paintings of Photorealists like Ralph Goings, Richard Estes, and Robert Bechtle – paintings which are, despite their overt subject matter, ontologically abstract.

It is also important to re-evaluate movements that combined the decorative, the syntactical and the referential; particularly Supports/Surfaces in France and Pattern and Decoration in America. The work of Claude Viallat and Noël Dolla, Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff looks even more to the point today than it did in the late 60's and 70's. In addition, older painters who have continued Matisse's line of inquiry should be given their due. In this regard there is a French-American connection. Two of the best such painters are Shirley Jaffe and Jack Youngerman. Youngerman spent his formative artistic years in Paris and Jaffe lives there still. As for now, there are many artists working in the complex arena I have described. They are, among others: Polly Apfelbaum, Christian Bonnefoi, Stephen Ellis, Shirley Kaneda, David Reed, and Philip Taaffe. In my painting I too am involved with these issues.

Certainty and wholeness are qualities that have been traditionally longed for. The desire however is less important than the means taken to satisfy it. Simply because something has worked before is no reason to keep trying it over and over again. The culture has reconfigured itself, and although the fit is never easy, it is up to painting to adapt itself to current conditions. Things are now both more interconnected and more dispersed than ever. It seems to me that the decorative abstract provides the sort of flexible structure needed to make sense, and more importantly to make art out of the world that we live in now

New York, September, 1996 Richard Kalina