

## The Reality of Abstraction

In the traditional view, abstraction has been seen as something possibly drawn from, but at heart opposed to, representation. There is, so to speak, the world of the abstract, and the world of the real. While this distinction may appeal to the general public (and often to realist painters), abstract artists tend to look at things differently: they consider their work to be perfectly real. If this is so, if they are truly representing reality, then why do abstract paintings tend to look so different from one another, while landscape paintings, for example, seem to have a great deal in common (particularly those painted in this century)? Or, to take it one step further, if abstract paintings do appear to be similar -- a Kazimir Malevich and a Robert Ryman, let's say -- why are we able to distinguish them so readily? Why is this similarity clearly superficial? The answer would seem to be that while painting in general stands in a metaphorical relation to reality -- it is both a distillation of and a discursion on, it -- that which is *deemed* reality by abstract artists varies widely.

Wassily Kandinsky, Malevich, Piet Mondrian and other abstract painters of their ilk saw the quotidian world as unreal and untrue in the deeper sense. They were aiming for a higher, spiritual reality; seeking to paint formal propositions and sets of relations which echoed the eternal. Limning the true in this way would help to banish confusion and would do its part to awaken and ennoble humankind. Their art was real: it was both

a clear, scientific expression of metaphysical truth and a blueprint for the improvement of the world.

The abstract expressionists, for their part, also tried to separate themselves from the banalities of everyday life and the visual forms that populated it. They consciously strove for newness, originality, and unacceptability. It may be difficult for us to understand, with the work of these artists so firmly placed in the canon, how an artist like Mark Rothko could believe that his paintings had an innate offensiveness, that they could never sit still, as it were, and behave in polite company. It makes more sense if we see abstract expressionist painting as a stand-in for the self: a self removed from the social matrix. To create a personal imagery and a personal format was to create a truth, a proposition that was so patently authentic and inventive that it could not be disputed. It was to establish the *condition* of reality, not merely to depict it. (As Jackson Pollock famously said, "I am nature.")

An important exhibition of contemporary abstract painting and sculpture was held at the end of the 1960s at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Tate Gallery in London. Titled *The Art of the Real*, it featured works by leading and second-rung minimal and colorfield artists, paintings by the non-de Kooning wing of the abstract expressionists, and a painting each by Jasper Johns and Georgia O'Keeffe. (The O'Keeffe-*Lake George Window* - was put in the show to be seen as explicitly linked in appearance, spirit, and intent with Ellsworth Kelly's 1949 painting *Window*.) In the catalogue essay

(and on the cover) the exhibition's curator, E.C. Goossen, clearly stated its formalist premise: "Today's 'real' makes no direct appeal to the emotions, nor it is involved in uplift, but instead offers itself in the form of the simple, irreducible irrefutable object." A Kelly, Frank Stella, or Morris Louis was real, and ultimately realistic (two quite different terms) because it was a self-evident entity, located firmly in a conceptual and perceptual field.

In the three sets of examples cited above, the reality painting depicts was, respectively, higher or spiritual reality, inner reality, and material reality. What about painting today? If abstract painting takes on reality, what reality is it choosing? Or to put it another way, what reality do the times force upon the artist? Mondrian, Pollock, and Stella were products of particular social fields and responded to them. Those fields are especially complex today. Painters operate in and with a shifting slew of signs, signifiers, reproductions, methodologies, interpretive models, societal representations, historical references, personal ideologies, high- and low-end technologies, and audiences. This reality is fluid, transparent, overlaid, susceptible to change. It is more weakly bound, less unified. To come to grips with this complicated *social* reality, abstract artists today are making art that might look neither traditionally abstract nor traditionally realistic. What is interesting to note is that this renewed engagement with the real, rather than subverting abstraction, serves, to quote Clement Greenberg (and with only partial irony). "to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence."

Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Snug Harbor Cultural Center, NY, 1997