

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen

The Four Corners of Painting

by Richard Kalina

Something quite striking has happened in the world of art. It is not, as one might expect, something that has suddenly appeared, but rather something that is no longer there. Modern art in general, and painting specifically, have been characterized by successions of “movements”—often annoying oversimplifications (particularly to the artists), but a fact of life nonetheless. Or at least it was. Strangely (or perhaps not) neither I nor anybody else with whom I have spoken has been able to come up with a widely recognized art movement—in particular, a movement in painting—that emerged after the late 1980s or possibly the early '90s. (The recent exhibition at the Hunter College/Times Square Gallery, *Conceptual Abstraction*, a recreation and updating of the 1991 show of the same name at the Sidney Janis Gallery, has brought to our attention possibly the last named painting movement.) What is beyond argument is that in the ensuing years—and earlier too—there has been much dismissal of painting; critically, curatorially, and from the practitioners of other media. Painters seem to be in a habitually defensive crouch. Painting is elitist, commercial and bourgeois; painting is irrelevant; painting fails to address important issues; painting is hopelessly limited and old-fashioned. And yet despite this, painting remains a remarkably vital field. Most artists in the U.S. identify themselves as painters (and they are operating at all stages of career and development); there are painting exhibitions everywhere; and the market for painting flourishes. What has happened?

These comments will be a look into the general state of painting, but one that does not take sides nor give priority to any one form of practice. This way of thinking about the problem also—most emphatically—does not suppose a linear view of history. Rather, the task is to create a *non-judgmental* format for viewing painting, and to allow for growth and expansion in a non-linear—that is in a real world way, not one that supports a market-driven culture of “breakthrough” (and implicitly sequentially ordered) masterpieces. (Although it doesn’t deny the possibility of them.) This approach is synchronous—synchronicity used here in de Saussure’s sense to indicate a “language state” at a given moment of time. As the critic Lawrence Alloway said, “Synchrony provides cross-sections, arrays of simultaneous information in terms of co-existence rather than succession.” Sequence is addressed in the broader

sense that historically things *did* follow other things and were perceived that way—geometric abstraction did, by and large, come before gestural abstraction, and artists who subsequently combined the two were likely to have been aware of the historical and ideological differences. (Needless to say, sequence and chronology are different animals.)

In this schema, painting from the modern period is apportioned into four large but divisible areas. Importantly, all painting today fits into these overall arenas.

1. The Mimetic
2. The Stylized Mimetic
3. The Abstract-Mimetic Hybrid
4. The Fully Abstract

There is no doubt that people will take issue with these categories—particularly the number of them (four has a nice ring to it, but it is scarcely absolute) and the host of meanings attached to certain terms (“mimetic,” for example, is bound to be contentious). The real point is the dividing up of what is, to all intents and purposes, a limited field. What might vex people the most is the assertion that there are borders to the field—that it is not the wide-open arena of invention that we had supposed it to be—both in terms of practice and criticism.

What is not being dealt with in any real detail at this time are specific analyses of individual painters. Some American painters are mentioned, but since *all* painters fit into this rubric, it is a matter of choosing the right mix to make the points clear. A reader might disagree with where each painter is placed, but that is understandable. Also, since artists change their work, a painter might find himself or herself in a number of different categories at any point in time. In addition, many painters do not just paint, and making different forms of art might very well be key to their project. Nonetheless, when they do paint, their paintings can be put into this system.

Why devise a critical rubric like this? Why not allow painting to be what it is? It seems increasingly evident that painting (and the viewing of painting) finds itself at a turning point. We are living in an age where various forces, primarily market-driven, but also critical, curatorial, and educational, are fostering a decidedly ahistorical attitude. A willed loss of historical perspective has a not-so-hidden implication—and that is that all work is perforce new and fresh, that it springs from the artist’s absolute individuality and therefore should not be questioned from the point of view of history, although it ought to be granted the very prerogatives accorded in the modernist past to “groundbreaking” art. This does us all a disservice.

An overall ordering, a taking of stock is needed, for painting is now in a situation that it has not found itself in during the entire period of the modern project. That period (characterized by art made by

independent artists concentrating, for the most part, on the demands of the art itself rather than cultural or social utility) was marked by a compulsion for differentiation—a tendency to form movements, to write manifestos, and for artists to talk incessantly amongst themselves. It was rather like the Big Bang. However, not all the mediums evolved at the same pace or at the same time. Painting was first and it has matured the soonest. While the disciplines might have moved together at various points in the modern project's trajectory, they do not now. Another space metaphor: modern art is like a multi-stage rocket, and the painting stage has now separated itself out.

While other media (sculpture and three dimensional work, photography and video, performance and “life into art” strategies) ostensibly offer more opportunity for overt innovation, painting has now essentially marked off its overall set of boundaries and is engaged in the task of elaboration and infilling. There is much work to be done in painting, but something has changed. Painting has ripened, altering our sense of expected innovation. While new things will happen in painting, that “newness” will be of a different order. (For example, colors can be combined in new ways, but will an entirely new hue be added to the spectrum?) We have (space metaphor number three) lifted off from Earth and can see the shape of the world. The concepts of *terra incognita* or *terra nullius* (the unknown and the unclaimed) cannot be the same as they were. But just as a shoreline has an infinite length when measured closely, there is no end to the possibilities inherent in the discipline. That painting is successful in this endeavor is proven by the continual creation of stylistically distinct bodies of work by painters. We can go deeper, make new spaces between existing areas, reference new subject matter as the world around us changes. However, new subject matter does not make new arenas of painting. This marks a key stage in the development of art.

If painting is its own continent, how then might it be mapped? The point is to recognize the situation on the ground, to see things for what they are, and importantly not to put a hierarchical order or any kind of historical inevitability on these different approaches, although one must acknowledge the historical arc of which painting is a part. To do so allows for a more clear-eyed vision of the state of the art: focus is maintained on what a painting looks like and what it does. Removed from the discussion are confusing and potentially self-aggrandizing issues of intention and subjective or non-evident referential systems. Thus we have a more readily verifiable means of sorting painting—by objective appearance and historical position. This approach does not impose the conditions of one form of painting on other forms and does not impose the conditions of painting on other media: in short, this is non-Greenbergian and non-formalist in the older sense of the term.

Painting by its nature tends toward conditions of material separation from the world. It resists (but does not preclude) the interactive and the interdisciplinary—an important part of our culture today and something that other media deal with more naturally. It has remained largely a matter of a certain specific material, paint, applied to flat rectilinear surfaces coincident with a vertical wall. That this surface over the years (both in the time of the modern project and the centuries before) has

predominantly been cloth stretched onto a wooden support is significant. If something does not change, there is a good chance that it is necessary to the enterprise. Painting is also (outliers notwithstanding) resolutely two-dimensional. No matter how “realistic” the technique, the fully dimensional outside world is brought into the convention-bound domain of two-dimensional representation and is thus distanced from the world depicted. Granted, there is a significant group of newer painting that has a three dimensional presence, but that three dimensionality is almost invariably placed in a dialectical relationship with the dominant body of two-dimensional work, commenting on that tradition and thus dependent on its existence.

Another area of separation: painting is generally more engaged with (and bound by) the history and development of its own medium than are other forms of art. Even in an increasingly ahistorical environment, there is more self-reflection and more analysis of the medium itself among painters—not surprising considering the long history of painting’s preeminence. (This does not deny that many artists in other media, particularly photography, operate consciously within historical parameters.) In the world of art there is a confraternity of painters, joined together by common purpose, educational experience (most often variations on Bauhaus pedagogies), broadly similar techniques and materials, and knowledge and appreciation of the medium’s history.

It is clear that today *all* of the areas of painting are now equally in play. Since one aspect of history—the value-imbued sequential has disappeared for painting, no one model of practice has more historical validity or value than any other. Your practice might be invested in, say, Gestural Abstraction—which is fine—but that manner of painting has no more claim to primacy than, say, the Mimetic. This was not the case in the 1950s, but it is today. We ought then to presume that the critical value placed on innovation and being “first” should be proportional to the size of the space that was left to be filled; in the more or less immediate postwar years those large but sparsely populated painting arenas have been Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Minimalism.

The four categories described in the following pages have an historical arc—they developed in the order listed, but we should note that history is both *sequential* and *recursive*; there are ongoing actions and repeating themes. In modern painting, the sequential until relatively recently seemed to be of the greatest significance—one movement followed another, and while the older painting was not tossed out, it felt retardaire and inefficient. There is a technological underpinning to this (not surprising in a world where technology and the machine were both the facts and the metaphors of the world), where newer technologies of necessity replace older ones, and where mixed technologies are often unwieldy.

The four main areas of modern painting:

(Again, the examples of painters chosen are just a small selection of the possibilities. Readers are invited to supply their own.)

1. The Mimetic.

This category consists of straightforward representations of the observable world. The primary generators of difference in this area are subject matter and technique. The perception of stylization has changed with time, so that Seurat's pointillist landscapes, which were seen as stylized at the time, are now more firmly in the area of the straightforwardly mimetic, whereas *La Grande Jatte* or *La Parade* are still in the realm of the Stylized Mimetic. The Mimetic encompasses a range of traditional painting approaches—from portraiture and figure painting to still life and landscape. Impressionism, much of Post-Impressionism, the Surrealism of painters like Magritte (along with contemporary surrealist revivals), the majority of Pop Art painting, Photorealism, and the contemporary varieties of landscape or figure painting belong in this category. Pop Art was (along with Gestural Abstraction), a major infill to the map of painting. Contemporary American painters in this area include: Robert Bechtle, John Currin, Rackstraw Downes, Eric Fischl, Alex Katz, Karen Kilimnik, Philip Pearlstein, Elizabeth Peyton, Richard Phillips, Alexis Rockman, Mark Tansey, and Alexi Worth.

2. The Stylized Mimetic.

This category pushes Mimesis toward distortion and stylization. There is a nascent tendency toward abstraction in this category, but representation is the driving force. Modern historical examples of this range from Matisse and the Fauves, to important sectors of Picasso's production as well as Léger's, to German Expressionism, and up through figurative Abstract Expressionists like Grace Hartigan and Fairfield Porter. In recent years this category includes the more straightforwardly representational German and Italian neo-Expressionists, and contemporary American practitioners like Charles Garabedian, Susan Rothenberg, Dana Schutz, Kara Walker, and Trevor Winkfield.

3. The Mimetic-Abstract Hybrid.

In the Hybrid Mimetic-Abstract approach, Abstraction and Mimesis meet as more or less equal actors. This is the most historically complex division. The *historical* arc went from the Mimetic to the Stylized Mimetic to the Hybrid Mimetic-Abstract to the Fully Abstract. Once however the Fully Abstract came into being, artists approached the Mimetic again to add complexity and overt reference to their work, introducing, for example, photographic images and text elements. Earlier examples of this are the many variants of Cubism, the majority of Dada-inspired painting, the surrealism of Miró, and much of the work of the Russian Constructivists. Later American examples include Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns; artists who followed in their footsteps, like David Humphrey and David Salle; Cubist-inspired painters like George Condo and David Storey; text-based and collaged-oriented painters like Mark Bradford, Glenn Ligon, Suzanne McClelland, Christopher Wool; and conceptualists like John Baldessari, Mel Bochner, David Diao, Peter Halley, Byron Kim, Chris Martin; and geometric artists like Al Held who create abstract perspectival spaces. Regarding three-dimensional painting: although

examples of this approach are to be found in all four categories, its existence as a real world object along with whatever formal or metaphorical freight it carries tends to put much of it in the Hybrid Mimetic-Abstract category.

4. The Fully Abstract.

This is work with no overt reference to the observable world. If the reference is absolutely essential to the painting (for example David Diao's red dot paintings indicating his art sales over the years, Byron Kim's skin tone monochromes, or Peter Halley's prisons and factories) then the painting belongs in the Hybrid-Mimetic-Abstract category. The Fully Abstract can be divided into four sections, with considerable (and conscious) overlap between them. They are:

a. Gestural (freely brushed) Abstraction.

This is the last truly major addition to the map of painting. While first evident in the early work of Kandinsky, it was left essentially dormant until picked up by the Abstract Expressionists and the Tachistes in the 1940s and '50s. The fact that there was such a big space left open (why is an interesting question) encouraged a large number of young painters to be engaged with it. Critically it fostered the supposition that Abstract Expressionism represented the next logical step in the progression of art. Clement Greenberg's dismissal of de Kooning's (and Pollock's) figurative explorations, and importantly (and perhaps more subtly), his attack on de Kooning's cubist methodologies made sense in the context of a sequential, progressive reading of history and as a critical tool to understand and evaluate certain newly emerging sectors of the Fully Abstract—Gestural Abstraction and Field or Atmospheric Abstraction. While Greenberg thought of his formulations as universal, they were in fact extremely specific. Contemporary American painters in this area include: Cora Cohen, Louise Fishman, Bill Jensen, Brice Marden (the later work), Melissa Meyer, and Sue Williams.

b. Field or Atmospheric Abstraction.

Begun essentially by the Rothko, Newman, Still wing of Abstract Expressionism (Pollock's drip paintings are crossovers between this and gestural abstraction), it continued on in Colorfield painting, and in later large-scale monochrome and minimalist painting (another important addition to the map, although not with as much breadth as the Gestural.) American examples include: Marcia Hafif, Robert Mangold, Brice Marden (the earlier work), Joseph Marioni, and Robert Ryman.

c. Geometric Abstraction.

This is the earliest branch of the Fully Abstract, starting with Mondrian and Malevich and continuing unabated until today. There are many contemporary examples. American painters include Mark Dagley, Valerie Jaudon, Harriet Korman, Odili Odita, Richard Roth, Don Voisine, and Joan Waltemath.

d. The Organized Organic.

Historically this is an abstracted distillation of 1930s biomorphic Picasso and Miró. In contemporary

painting this presents itself as a form of abstraction characterized by a more distanced and grammatical approach, often borrowing elements from both geometric and gestural abstractions. American examples are Frances Barth, Stephen Ellis, Joanne Greenbaum, Mary Heilmann, Shirley Jaffe, Richard Kalina, Shirley Kaneda, Jonathan Lasker, Allison Miller, Elizabeth Murray, Tom Nozkowski, David Reed, David Row, Philip Taaffe, and James Siena.

As mentioned, modern painting is now in a position it has rarely occupied: all of the forms of painting are being practiced in roughly equal measure. There is no one leading format, and therefore one approach cannot claim the mantle of historical inevitability or a place at the leading edge. This is in some way an extension of the common understanding that painting is no longer the default setting, as it were, for art. A not unimportant question: what was all the talk of painting being dead really about? There was a strong element of hostility and dismissal, and of course it elicited and still elicits a counter-reaction from painters. But perhaps painting's detractors were on to something: they were sensing not painting's end, but a change in its methodology of innovation, a quiet transformation of its deepest sense of itself. This change of identity resulted in certain losses: a key one (starting in the 1990s) was the surrendering of the ability to produce the kind of iconic images that painting was accustomed to making. It seemed that those images now came more readily to photography, video or installation. (Shark in a tank?) To strive directly for the overtly "important" statement in painting risked over-determination, pretension, cleverness, self-consciousness, and sententiousness. These are all the hallmarks of academicism, and now firmly reside in those more "interesting" and "relevant" forms of artistic expression. But painting's limitations are now its advantages—an example of the economic principle of creative destruction. Something is lost, but that loss is a gain as well. (Interestingly, renunciation has been at the heart of avant-garde practice, and the questioning of originality is an intrinsic element of postmodernism.) The unpromising, the uninteresting, the familiar, the modest or the mundane have proven to be especially productive areas for making lasting art. Painters can delve more deeply and push past the merely clever or ostensibly "creative." Painting's necessary distancing from the world allows for the mysterious and the inexplicable to take root. A body of painting will be seen as important for what it does rather than what it says it refers to: a change in subject matter or reference is scarcely change at all. Mapping the state of painting today and sensing its boundaries does not imply stasis, but rather a new kind of growth. Painters are, as ever, finding spaces for themselves and creating readily recognizable and unique bodies of work, work that is as capable as ever of emotional power, the giving of deep aesthetic pleasure, and the creation of the visually unexpected and surprising.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RICHARD KALINA is a painter and critic. He is a Contributing Editor at *Art in America* and is represented by the Lennon, Weinberg Gallery in New York. He is Professor of Art at Fordham University, where he teaches art history and studio art.