

The Unusual Suspects: A View of Abstraction

The Unusual Suspects examines some key elements of today's abstract painting. While scarcely an atlas of an arena this large, it does provide a way to look at the current state of affairs. The paintings in this show, varied as they might be, do not fit neatly into sets of fixed categories, but rather they organize themselves around related points and orientations on the larger map of abstraction – in this case an interest in color, logical organization, careful facture, and indirect but compelling social and philosophical reference. Multiplicity and shifting perspectives characterize abstract painting today. There are no approaches that are privileged over others, no aims more compelling or historically demanded, no gaps that must be filled before we can proceed. This is not old-fashioned pluralism, rather it is the recognition that in the defined and convention-encompassed precincts of painting, the continually expanding body of work coming into the world will, by its nature, seek and find places to settle. In doing so, the accepted distance between points on the spectrum of style will be altered and new affinities and correspondences revealed.

By using a synchronic lens to look at today's abstract painting (that is a view of a larger field at a specific point in time) artists will necessarily be reflected in different lights, seen from different angles. In the process, singularities will emerge. Abstract painting exists now in an interconnected web and that web is being continually warped. How an artist will be seen depends on how the web is oriented and where the observer is. The artists in this show, from different

generations and backgrounds, represent points of intersection in the field, examples of concentrated interest. In an art system where boundaries are regularly crossed it is unproductive to set up a series of boxes in which to fit artists, but quite useful to posit various clusters of attraction (rather like iron filings clustering around a magnetic pole). This creates an interconnected map rather than a logical flow chart, a shifting network rather than an Alfred Barr-like diagram of originality, lineage and influence.

An ordering of this sort is not only non-hierarchical and non-linear, but in a metaphorical way, non-planar. It is like a loose grid inscribed on a sheet of paper, rendered three-dimensional as the paper is turned and twisted. Surprising confluences appear as seemingly disparate things become closer to one another. It is a system of affinities, a shape-shifting, three-dimensional chess game, rather than one of leaders and followers, of lineage and its associated expectations of disruption and rejection. Siting a painting in the bounded but expanding field of abstraction is less a precise calculation than (as in physics) a reckoning of the *probability* that something is somewhere and, in this case, of a certain scale.

Abstraction today is self-conscious and purposeful, deliberate and deliberative. It is, importantly, not a movement or a group of movements, not a unified approach. There is the sense of the interchangeability of components, of the availability of a shared stylistic toolbox. While inevitably imbued with the underlying irony implicit in postmodernism, this art is neither negative nor is it a cynical pastiche. Rather the irony (conscious or unconscious) allows for distancing, breathing room, and

in the process resurrects the older and profoundly optimistic idea of the freedom of art. Everything is on the table and anybody can play. You do not have to be certain kind of person, an artist with a specified history, a given ideology or a prescribed program. Abstraction both today and in the recent past is fluid; reflecting the larger set of complex, shifting, abstract relations that underlie cognition and perception. It is multi-layered and combinational, not unlike vision itself -- the ocular merging that results in an image composed of separate inputs (including memory) being seamlessly joined. The strictures and structures of history too are creatively loosened. They can be played with or referenced at will. Interchangeability, not inevitability is the key. The goal is the formation of the lucid, transparent object, not the obdurate, irreducible one.

In the absence of hierarchical orderings or priorities, how are things held together? Abstraction in its fully formed state has been with us for somewhat over a hundred years. Western art had not seen anything quite like it, although the elements of abstraction were to be found throughout the productions of western art – particularly in painting, the decorative arts, and architecture. As abstraction rapidly expanded, it coalesced into an ongoing series of named movements. These were usually localized, although cubism, and later on Abstract Expressionism, had an especially wide reach. The artists in these movements were generally acquainted, lived in relative proximity to each other, and had a tight circle of critics and supporters. There were often manifestos, artists' statements, and social activities (panels, performances, lectures) associated with

movements. Generally speaking, very few artists were satisfied with the names of movements, and when pressed would often deny that they were connected to that movement, although despite their protests, history kept them there.

This process of movement formation stopped (especially for painting) in the late 1980s or at the latest, the early 1990s. There might have been a few attempts (often market initiated) but they lacked conviction. Yet all the while, painting continued unabated. A result of the loss of differentiation and urgency that movements provided was on one hand liberating for the artists: they were not bound by the rationale of a movement or the strictures applied by critics associated with that movement. But alongside that liberation was the tendency to take the easy way out. Given the absence of certainty (misguided or not) that movements provided, a kind of generic, standard abstraction came into being, producing a slew of perfectly adequate and well executed gestural paintings, hard edged geometric, soft edged geometric, organic, semi-realistic, and mixed media works – or combinations of any of the above. In a way, abstraction had become another genre, like landscape, still life, or figure painting.

The large number of merely adequate paintings has led us to think of abstraction as a settled question; but there are many contemporary abstract paintings that must be looked at in a different and challenging way. They might at first not appear to be something especially new, but then the field of painting in general, and abstraction in particular, is an ostensibly circumscribed one – bounded by historical and material concerns. The very large majority of paintings are

rectilinear, flat, painted on a familiar painting surface (canvas, paper, wood, metal, a wall), and executed with regular paints (oil and acrylic for the most part) or possibly embellished with collage or assemblage elements. And while numbers of abstract paintings depart from strict rectilinearity and physical flatness, that departure is conditioned and given dialectical substance by the existence of the rectilinear and the flat. They are seen as shaped or dimensional *because* the bulk of paintings are not. Familiarity of material and technique, combined with the inevitability of historical reference, and painting's innate metaphorical quality (it's a painting but it's something else too) leads to a superficial similarity – the misunderstanding that since paintings, and particularly abstract paintings, share basic commonalities, they are saying essentially the same things and should be read in the same way.

But abstract painting has changed, although the change has rarely been noted. This change affects both paintings from both the present and the recent past. It is as much a matter of how they are viewed as how they are planned and executed by the artist. Earlier abstraction moved into open territory. The Cubists, Futurists, Constructivists, Dadaists, or Expressionists of the first decades of the 20th century, freed themselves from the constraints of representation and in doing so saw the newly opened vistas of the non-representational. In a similar way the American Abstract Expressionists, operating after the historical dividing line of the Great Depression and the horrors of WWII envisioned themselves setting out on grand projects in what until then had been the unloved stepchild of Europe,

New York City. In all of these cases the artists were confronting their version of *terra nullius*, or land belonging to no one. They created critical and philosophical structures in which to operate, and then made work that satisfied and illuminated those requirements.

The situation is different now. Work in abstraction has been going on for thirty to forty years without accepted structures to both view and make it. It has simply been made and made by artists with a real aversion to the prescriptive. It is not a question of creating art to fit a general program, but rather how to view the art that has already been made in the *absence* of a program, in a land implicitly recognized by artists as fully occupied. Art movements always positioned themselves against earlier movements, and have as their basis a rejection of previous critical or stylistic norms. Mid-century abstraction approached previous art, such as cubism, as something to be sweated out, rebelled against. Present abstraction takes previous art as a more or less equally weighted given. With the increasing number of artists and art schools, plus the globalization of the art world, production has sharply increased. Along with the jettisoning of art movements, the change in the media and publishing world and in the visual precincts of academia, there has been a lessening of the power, influence and reach of traditional art critics. More art and artists, fewer critics, and a diminished sense of cohesive community should in fact call for a renewed and thoughtful ordering of the diffused state of painting. It is an ordering however of what has and is in the process of being done – a synchronic view -- not merely a

description of or advocacy for the work of a like-minded group. If abstract painting seems to be going one way now -- and we can certainly note a shift toward a deliberate, clearer, more bounded look -- that does not, per force, imply historical inevitability, ideological obligation, or aesthetic necessity.

If there is no such thing as mainstream abstraction anymore, if the conceptual space between painters is a constantly shifting set of measurements, if criticism and theory in abstract art cannot be prescriptive, then how can we identify *in the present moment*, what is of real interest? The artists in this exhibition are often seen as “artists’ artists,” exemplars of thought-provoking conjunctions and approaches, aesthetic first responders. The purpose of this show is to illuminate a sector of the moving web of art, to present a group of painters who reflect the aesthetic light around them in unexpected and exciting ways. The paintings of women and men of different backgrounds and, importantly, of different ages, each with different goals and different means of attaining them, are being placed together so that every work of art will both stand on its own and be given meaning by the works around it. The paintings on display are fully formed and complex, as well as carefully and skillfully made. They represent what might be thought of as an Industrious Revolution. They are a snapshot of a significant portion of abstract art today, a still image of a moving map. In the lively and uncertain art world that we inhabit, and especially in the bounded, bracketed, but expanding zone of abstraction, the energy that we see here creates its own form.

Artists: Paolo Arao, Samantha Bittman, Amie Cunat, Angela Heisch, Federico

Herrero, Shirley Jaffe, Valerie Jaudon, Shirley Kaneda, Harriet Korman, Jonathan Lasker, Carrie Moyer, Thomas Nozkowski, Odili Donald Odita, Brian O'Doherty, Joanna Pousette-Dart, Katia Santibañez, David Storey, Barbara Takenaga, Kevin Umaña, Stanley Whitney, Jack Youngerman

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