

AFTER ASPECTS OF ABSTRACT PAINTING SINCE 1970 FALL

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Even though my work is geometric in appearance, its meaning is intended as antithetical to that of previous geometric art. Geometric art is usually allied with the various idealisms of Plato, Descartes, and Mies. My work, in fact, is a critique of such idealisms.

I have tried to employ the codes of Minimalism, Color Field painting, and Constructivism to reveal the sociological basis of their origins. Informed by Foucault, I see in the square a prison; beyond the mythologies of contemporary society, a veiled network of cells and conduits.

To further locate my work, I would like to invoke Robert Smithson's achievement. While Smithson branded the blighted industrial landscape with the symbols of ideal geometry, I seek, conversely, to interject into the ideal world of geometric art some trace of that same social landscape.

["Statement (1983)," *Peter Halley: Collected Essays 1981-1987* (Zürich: Bischofsberger/Sonnabend Publications, 1988).]

MARK HARRIS



In spite of doubts as to what might be 'material' about a painting, I start and end with materiality. 'Material' might mean the body of the work, referring to the substance that is simply there. It might even refer to an inherent property of the work as something always beyond our grasp; the sense of Heidegger's Being of beings, reinvesting the Kantian thing-in-itself. By contrast, it might refer to a construction that is supposedly entirely our own, a materiality formed only by our idea, our consciousness, in the sense of an object indistinguishable from the thought of it. As I dismantle the components of gestural painting only to reassemble them in an unfamiliar syntax (revealing the conceptual basis to my work), I am enthralled by the process of altering first the material that is simply given, which in my case is nearly always paper, and secondly, the material of the idea of abstract painting which also changes as I work.

Thinking about this show, I've wondered why abstract painters have held some 20th-century figurative artists in high regard. Ensor, Monet, Soutine, Avery, and Morandi have perhaps remained fascinating for the material qualities of the paint and for the correspondence between that materiality and the qualities of the perceived world. Paint as decomposing matter (Ensor), paint as light (Monet), paint as body (Soutine), paint as topography (Avery), paint as mass (Morandi): from this evidence springs a gamut of possibilities for paint as presence. Yet 'presence' inevitably implies ontology, a concept I am deeply ambivalent about when it alludes to some existence beyond our grasp, just as I feel an inadequacy in the meaning of painting as a pure construction of consciousness. Surely, I find myself thinking as I work, there must be some intertwining of the two possibilities. We may contrast this idea of abstract painting as an ontological structure with the idea of it as a mere signifying system where its

devices point to the meanings outside what would only be its residual materiality. It interests me though to think of a way in which these are not mutually exclusive since my concern with materiality certainly engages with both propositions. As a body with qualities, the painting occupies my physical world as if it had a presence of its own. At the same time, as I intentionally build into it, it is a system of recognizable pictorial devices that convey meaning as signs with no presupposition of inherent presence.

This last possibility suggests a paradox to the designation 'abstraction,' intended to distinguish itself from that art concerned with appearances. As abstract painting adds to the inventory of that world of appearances, it seems worth asking at what point these repeatedly used non-referential forms cross over into the realm of all representable appearances. In other words, are abstract paintings figurative where they deal with the representation of the devices of abstract painting, as my own work does?

With my work, included here in the exclusive context of abstract painting, these questions feel more pressing. In certain early pieces, I would make a collage of pre-painted paper to mimic a gestural drawing shown alongside. These *trompe l'oeil* paintings, providing the illusion of an intuitive gestural image, set out the contrivances of the idiom without irony. There is a sense in which the language is being used as if it still retained its expressive power. In recent work, the gestures become literal sculptural equivalents as part of fragile assemblages. The layers are formed by dripping paint onto paper and then cutting away unpainted areas, as if peeled from the surface of a painting and floating independently. These fragile structures, determined only by the 'accidental' marks, are then superimposed to form a denser web of isolated gestural strata.

Among other effects, these fragmentary paintings indicate ways in which the categories *gesture* and *action* have become historically over-invested with inappropriate claims of inherent qualities. Who can now believe the accounts of the heroic aleatory expressiveness of Abstract Expressionism? It seems more likely that those paintings were made with great premeditation and rehearsal, the artist developing an inventory of marks to signify subjectivity.

So why still abstract painting? Perhaps because it can stimulate uncertainties like those above while deferring any lasting resolution of them. The materiality that I'm speaking about is also a materiality of ideas and forms, not just of the body of the work. The Hegelian idea of the unity of the concept with its object, each forming the other, interests me here as a way of understanding the complex array of abstract painting. Paintings, as they demonstrate their specific matrices of intention, would form a notion of abstraction that, unlike a static Platonic Idea, continually changes under the impact of its constituent parts. These parts are in their turn influenced by the notion of abstraction that they are actively defining. Such a scheme replaces a canon of abstraction with diversity. The great variety of work that in many urban centers now defines the idea of abstract painting only forms that definition by dissolving the idea's coherence.

MADELINE HATZ



© MIKAEL LEVIN

In my native Swedish, the word for *room* means both the physical object and the more abstract notion of space, as in the dichotomy 'time and space.' But here space is not vague and limitless, but rather graspable and delimited.

So, is there space in my paintings? No, there is room rather than space, but then just barely room enough. The painting is maladjusted, at odds with its own element. Just like the canvas on the stretcher, the painting itself is held in a state of tension, a false vacuum, so to speak, ready to be ripped.

This implies a certain nonchalance toward its own existence as image or design, which is the only thing reproduction can convey. The painting's actuality does not reside in its design, but precisely in the tension between its physical fact in the room and its eruptive opposite, noncontainment. This happens through the interaction which draws us into the paint and subverts our sense of scale.

Also, in Swedish the two distinct notions of color and of paint are encapsulated in one single word. As though color/hue, instead of being purely retinal, had distinct physical properties like matter.

It is as though the Rocaille motifs had sprung directly out of the paint's animation. Here are states of expansion and expectancy: the paint itself becomes the 'room.'

Thirteen Frames for an Exhibition

*I do not know which to prefer
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.*

—Wallace Stevens
(from *13 Ways to See a Blackbird*)

In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant defined the picture frame as a parergon (accessory, ornament, supplement), a composite, not an amalgam, of inside and outside; in fact, although called an outside, it is an inside. Derrida, on the other hand, in *La Verité en Peinture*, describes a parergon as something “against, beside, and above and beyond” the work but not incidental to it. Are frames, then, part of the work? Are they detachable from it? Do they change it?

In thinking about frames, I began to think about more metaphorical ones. I thought at first that this show could be essentially unformatted, “unframed,” but it could not; the entire process of organizing an exhibition was of course an enclosure, an interference, a multiple framing.

1. *The Frame of Origin*

Three years ago, a show of abstract painting from the 1970s was proposed; the first “frame.” Over the next year, however, the project expanded to include the ’80s and ’90s, each decade “framing” the other.

2. *The Frame of External Boundaries*

The initial proposition, a ’70s painting show, remained central. To see a large selection of work from the period after the “death of painting”—a death foretold so often in the ideologies of modernism that it has become part of the ritual—seemed crucial for any re-assessment of abstract painting’s meaning.

We also needed to be reminded that many abstract paintings were made and exhibited during the ’70s, even though they were invisible at the time because critical attention was focused on conceptual art, post-minimalist art, performance, process, and public art, and on earthworks and site works. Then, it seemed more pointed to juxtapose these invisible paintings to the extremely visible ones of the ’80s, when painting was recalled from “exile.” To include the ’90s was only a further extension of this particular frame, an extension that seemed necessary in order to more fully survey the state of abstract painting.



The Guggenheim’s magisterial exhibition, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline*, ended at around 1970; another influential abstract painting show, *The*



Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985 (Los Angeles County Museum of Art,

1986), focused on the abstract sublime, on occult and hermetic traditions. Both became still other frames for this project as imaginal counterpoints, boundaries. Yet it was important to make AFTER THE FALL less grand than they had been, less historical. For a sense of abstract painting as an ongoing, vital project, it was important that AFTER THE FALL be more colloquial and discursive, its contents more open-ended and inclusive, like *Slow Art: Painting in New York Now*, the quirky, disorderly, but lively show of painting sponsored by PS 1 Museum in 1992.

Clement Greenberg wrote in a 1940 essay, *Towards A Newer Laocoon*, that we can only dispose of abstraction by “assimilating it, by fighting our way through it.” Almost sixty years later, abstraction and abstract painting have not been disposed of, assimilated, or fought through, nor do their ends seem near. The persistence of painting, of abstract painting, is amazing; what is it about the language and the medium that still hold artists in thrall?

3. *The Frame of Abstraction*

Aspects of abstract painting: a frame of frames, of cut-offs, of superimpositions, of partial views, of partiality. To abstract—to frame, order, choose, define; to tear a piece out of the flank of nature; to refine; to invent—is a primary impulse of human beings. But abstraction has been stretched to the point of losing its

edge, its definition. It has been misused, or carelessly used, all along. Matisse had said that all art is abstract and indeed, by now, many former distinctions between abstraction and representation have collapsed into each other.

But what abstraction? Abstraction opposed to empathy, to expressionism? Abstraction opposed to representation? Abstraction as artifice, artificer? Abstraction opposed to the world? Here, abstraction includes the “non-objective,” the “real;” that is, the non-illusory, the material and the “referential,” as a summary, an epitome, an imaginative isolation of distinctive characteristics. (Thomas McEvelley writes in *The Exile's Return* that the emphasis on abstraction as pure form has obscured the fact that much of 20th-century abstraction involves symbolic representation of ideas about reality “with varying degrees of mediation.”)

What represents abstraction now? Can we even speak of identity? Of what is? Can we only approach identity negatively, to infer it from what it is not?

What does abstraction mean now? A series of re-readings, revisions, repetitions? An endless capacity for absorption and assimilation? (Shirley Kaneda wrote in the catalogue, *Re:Fab*, that “abstract painting is a synthetic whose meanings lie in the ‘how’ of signification, representation and metaphor, rather than in the ‘what’ of allegory, analogy and simile;” meaning, she concluded, is formed through the viewer’s interaction with the art, although that interaction and subsequent interpretation are not fixed.)

As this exhibition demonstrates, we cannot speak of abstraction in the singular.



4. *The Frame of Categories*

Descriptive categories were formulated to sort out the paintings. One category was planar or structural abstraction which referred to non-flat, rectilinear and non-rectilinear formats and constructions. Material abstraction was another, emphasizing media and process. Gestural or expressive abstraction was a third category, dealing with the painterly, the organic or biomorphic, the rhythmic. Geometric abstraction was still another, characterized by squares, circles, triangles, straight lines and other regular forms and sequences. Minimalist abstraction included the reductive, the monochromatic. Conceptual abstraction referred to the other categories but challenged them, dismantling the conventions and utopian aspirations of modernist painting; often, it redefined these conventions and aspirations as mere devices with which to construct a painting. Conceptual abstraction could be quotational, pluralistic, theoretical, referential, linguistic. It could support a context that includes the cultural, the social, and the political/historical. It was a "worldly" abstraction.

However, even to sort out is not simple, not clean-cut, not consensual.

5. *The Frame of the Artists*

This is the frame of the participants: Jeremy Adams, Clytie Alexander, Gregory Amenoff, Polly Apfelbaum, Jo Baer, Frances Barth, Andrea Belag, Linda Benglis, Jake Berthot, James Bishop, Ross Bleckner, Lawrence Carroll, Cora Cohen, David Craven, Karin Davie, Stuart Diamond, David Diao, Porfirio DiDonna, Moira Dryer, Stephen Ellis,



Romany Eveleigh, Louise Fishman, Sam Gilliam, Marcia Hafif, Peter Halley, Mark Harris, Madeleine Hatz, Christian Haub, Nancy Haynes, Mary Heilmann, Al Held, Phoebe Helman, Ron Janowich, Valerie Jaudon, Bill Jensen, Martha Keller, Byron Kim, Harriet Korman, Janet Kusmierski, Jonathan Lasker, Marilyn Lerner, Margrit Lewczuk, Robert Mangold, Craig Manister, Fabian Marcaccio, Suzanne McClelland, Melissa Meyer, Joan Mitchell, John L. Moore, Jill Moser, Elizabeth Murray, Judith Murray, Thomas Nonn, Thomas Nozkowski, George Peck, Katherine Pavlis Porter, Rebecca Purdum, David Reed, Milton Resnick, Dorothea Rockburne, Winston Roeth, Stephen Rosenthal, Erik Saxon, Peter Schuyff, Sean Scully, Susan Smith, Joan Snyder, Pat Steir, Frank Stella, Philip Taaffe, Susanna Tanager, Denyse Thomasos, Frederic Matys Thursz, Merrill Wagner, Marjorie Welish, Stephen Westfall, Jack Whitten, Joan Witek, Robert Yasuda.



6. *The Frame of the Curator*

This is the frame of my own distortions, based on individual preferences and passions, conscious and unconscious biases, a particular clustering of the psyche, of heart, mind, and soul.

This is the frame of my inten-



tion. What I hoped to present was an impure, even idiosyncratic lineage of abstract painting against which exchanges between individual paintings occurred. What I wanted the viewer to see was a large



group of paintings which were diverse in sensibility and look: awkward, elegant, detached, deeply felt, cool, hot, slow, fast. I wanted the viewer to see if the language of abstraction still held interest, if it could still excite; I wanted the viewer to see if it had or had not become too easy, too formulaic, too familiar. I wanted the viewer, in fact, just to *see*, which is not so easy to do.

7. *The Frame of the Installation*

The paintings were installed chronologically by decade, then by categories, which means by visual relationships and connections, subject to architectural constraints. The chronological structuring seemed the most neutral of frames which are never neutral. The aim was to create an environment in which the viewer could go forward and backward at will, looking, and in looking, to discover something different, something that might have escaped notice before, something for further speculation, for agreement and disagreement. As Viktor Shklovsky wrote in 1917, “art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and the length of perception....”



8. *The Frame of the Artists' Statements*

They can be ingenuous or disingenuous, profound or merely opaque, elusive or clear, resistant or elucidating. They can be modest, hubristic, eccentric, pragmatic, poetic, brilliant, witty, dull, even false. They may parallel the art, converge on it, or be utterly distinct. Yet they are almost always of interest since they provide a point of view, another way into intention, these words that come from the same source as the paintings.

9. *The Frame of the Catalogue*

The catalogue is the alter ego of a show, its ambassador, its afterlife, its “accessory, ornament, supplement.” It is useful in many ways and affects the show itself. The choices made in the production of a catalogue are as complex as those that produce an exhibition.

10. *The Frame of the “Response” Catalogue*

This is the frame of the viewer represented by a number of artists, critics, writers, poets and others interested in abstract art. They have been invited to view the show and write about some aspect of abstraction which is of particular interest to them, based on whatever topics AFTER THE FALL might evoke. These essays will be published as Volume II of this catalogue.

11. *The Frame of Miscellaneous Glosses*

Labels (artist, title, date, medium): the first salvo in the informing and situating of the viewer, now considered essential. Wall text, brochures, handouts with additional facts, discussion groups, talks, panels, tours, reading rooms, videos, other museological strategies. Now also considered essential.

12. *The Frame of Questions*

For example: What is abstraction? What is the opposite of abstraction? Can abstraction be separated from representation, from being the negation of representation?

Does the conceptual base for both figurative and abstract painting remain on the defensive?

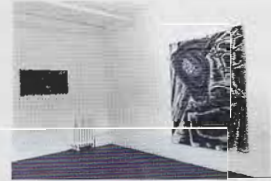
Can abstract painting, or abstract art, invent a heroic ambiguity out of what Baudelaire called the "heroism of modern life" to match the ambiguities, the relativism and circularity of postmodern life?

Why abstraction?



13. *The Frame of the Paintings Themselves*

Foucault, in his essay, "Fantasia of the Library," said that since Manet, "every painting now belongs within the squared and massive surface of painting." I see this conceit, this "surface," as a great frame, one that underlies and surrounds this exhibition of self-conscious, auto-critical, passionate, and passionately intelligent paintings. This is where modernism's preoccupation with experience still prevails: this is the ultimate frame.



Lilly Wei
curator

Joseph Beuys, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965. Performance at the Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf. Photograph ©1986, Walter Vogel. An allegory collapsing the boundaries between nature and culture, an interpenetration that results in something rich and strange. Ultimately, it is about hope and the miraculous, transformative power of art, of what happens after.