The New Abstraction

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True, it never really went away. But abstraction is in the midst of a revival, flaunting its brilliant past as it reconfigures itself for the future
by Barbara A. MacAdam

Abstract painting is back. True, it never really went away, but it had been shunted aside by the vagaries of time and fashion. Abstraction was attacked for being old media, played out, new-idea stunted, and out of sync with contemporary life and thought—as well as for being decorative and solipsistic. While abstraction persisted in Europe and even Asia, it became a sidebar to the New York art scene, which was flooded, paradoxically, with a technologically sophisticated assortment of new-media works, along with an array of updated conventional representational paintings.

Just as the figure—once disparaged as academic, facile, or simply frumpy—experienced a renascence, showing up in numerous guises to suit the social, political, and artistic moment, abstract art has been flaunting its brilliant past and reconfiguring itself for the present and future.

It says something when a painter of modest-size, solid abstract canvases like Tomma Abts wins the Tate's Turner Prize, an award that usually targets edgy, controversial art.

And then there are the shows like "Big Bang! Abstract Painting for the 21st Century," at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park in Lincoln, Massachusetts (through the 22nd of this month), which opened with an explosion of new abstract art. The works in the show, by 15 mostly emerging artists, were inspired by nothing less than "computer technology, cosmology, quantum physics, information theory, genetics, complexity theory, remote sensing, and other sets of current scientific visual languages," according to exhibition curators Nick Capasso and Lisa Sutcliffe. Where Barbara Takenaga depicts an imploding—or expanding—universe, creating a spectral buzz, Cristi Rinklin draws on computer imagery for her painterly abstractions and explains that "technology recalibrates how we imagine the world."

We are seeing both the return of abstraction and a new abstraction. In the last few months alone, there has even been an exhibition of figurative sculptor Audrey Flack's abstract paintings from the 1950s at the Rider University Art Gallery in Lawrenceville, New Jersey; not to mention an Albers and Moholy-Nagy show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Whitney's Mark Grotjahn exhibition.

But why now? The resurgence could in part be a response to contemporary life—to globalization and the desire for a universal language, to the technological revolution, to new materials, and to the endless pursuit of something novel. Abstract pictures may convey a more comprehensible range of associations than personal, narrative pictures can. Or it could be a form of nostalgia.

It may well be that the "art world is still dominated by an interest in images across the board," as Gary Garrels, chief curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, suggests. While he acknowledges that there seems to be a healthy regard for abstract work, he says, "I don't know

if it's been more or less since Pop art took Abstract Expressionism off its pedestal." What he has definitely seen among the new abstract painters is an "interest in going back to the roots of modernism and the fundamental issues of modernism—to Mondrian and Kandinsky."

He also points out that "Minimalism has been fully embraced lately. It has become an accepted vocabulary, especially among collectors." But scholars, too, have begun to revisit it. "It's the appropriate time to do a dissertation about the 1960s," Garrels says. "The information is all there. People are still alive; it's far enough from the immediacy of that moment so you can have a historical perspective."

Linda Norden, an independent curator and writer currently advising on the 2008 Whitney Biennial, sees the renewed interest in abstraction as one of two concurrent impulses. "There's a documentary impulse that provides some way of responding directly to the world and a corollary urge to abstraction, which aims at the emotional fallout and underlying forces driving those actions," she says. "Both impulses speak to the state of the world and change—the big millennial questions as well as the issues of the present." She finds that much of the work today is "more in the spirit of earlier 20th-century artists like Malevich, where abstraction emerged out of something both real and revolutionary, like war, industrial technology, and the radical social, economic, and cultural upheavals endemic throughout Europe at the time."

Norden continues, "The problem with abstraction is always its closeness to the decorative, to something that feels escapist and closed-eyed rather than probing, as, for example, when Peter Halley attempted 20 years ago to overlay a graphic notation, referring to both the cultural critique of Michel Foucault and the black lines of Mondrian, onto a ground of phosphorescent house paint. In the painting of Amy Sillman or Tomma Abts, there is something more concrete at play—an effort to make every decision visible in the painting of the painting."

The abstract revival brings back into view the intensively inscribed, nonobjective, but strangely thoughtful drawings of veteran Conceptualist William Anastasi, the nervous gestural painting of Cora Cohen, and the architectural abstractions of Joan Waltemath. It also introduces young emerging artists like Torben Giehler, who unites nature, technology, and psychology in works that combine digital and conventional media and play with spatial reconfigurations.

Some painters are reappearing and taking unexpected turns, like Op star Larry Poons, famous for his dancing dots, who showed densely worked, surprisingly impressionistic compositions still engaged in optical tactics but of a more subtle sort at the Danese gallery in New York last winter.

Meanwhile, shows such as "Elemental Form," at L&M Arts last fall, have featured some of the best works of the high Minimalists, with major pieces by masters of the 1960s and '70s like Sol LeWitt and Carl Andre.

Bridging the long-established and the young, techno-savvy artists is a group, ranging from Jeff Elrod—who shows with Fredericks & Freiser and essentially paints with his computer mouse on flat-colored computer-screen-like surfaces, merging the look and ideas of old media with those of the new—to Grotjahn, represented by Anton Kern Gallery, who, in a kind of quiet Op mode, sharply but subtly vectors into space with improbable colors and acute diagonal lines to establish a disorienting visual field.

Jason Duval paints letters and shapes that are at once curved and angular using minor-key colors, recalling CoBrA artist Bram van Velde and a style that evokes Per Kirkeby, A. R. Penck,

and Markus Lupertz. “One reason I continue to be interested in abstract painting,” Duval says, “is because it allows me to simultaneously engage with the history of painting while being inventive and idiosyncratic. This is partly because it often feels like no one is looking, and I mean that in a good way.”

Alongside these players are people like Ryan McGinness, who blends his growing personal library of graphic symbols with agitated flourishes and scrawls in an abstract language that embraces and comments on art history and youth culture. Chicago’s Scott Short makes photocopies of a sheet of colored paper and then copies each copy hundreds of times, finally photographing a single page in slide form, projecting it, and then reproducing the image as a real painting. Here accident and painstaking care merge new and old media. At the other end of the spectrum, Uruguayan Ricardo Lanzarini’s conceptual tactic is to draw crowds of tiny, insignificant people, vegetables, or objects and use them as elements in design rather than figures in a narrative, although they do induce in the viewer a sense of angst.

A number of artists are making spiritually based works. These take many forms, from Shirazeh Houshiary’s near-invisible paintings based on the almost microscopic transcribing of chants and prayers to the many evocations of the cosmos in the manner of Vija Celmins to the more traditional, tantric-inspired luminous paintings of Stephen Mueller. These works prove that abstraction can indeed accommodate spiritual and emotional content, which may or may not be communicated to the viewer. Through it all, Agnes Martin, who regularly appears internationally in solo and group shows, seems to have attained high-priestess status.

Oliver Herring, the German-born conceptualist who frequently uses the figure in his fractured, cubistic photographs, videos, and mirrored sculptures, is among many who take issue with abstraction for being “unemotional,” but he makes an exception for Martin. He recalls how “tears came to my mother’s eyes when she first saw Martin’s early works.” What he and others rail against is what they consider the empty elegance of abstract painting.

But none of these issues is new. Since the time of the early modernists, painting has had to answer to such criticism. The truth is that there have always been abstract paintings that deal with big and small issues, both spiritual and formal. Testifying to abstraction’s strength and persistence is the current traveling show “High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967–1975,” organized by Katy Siegel and David Reed for Independent Curators International, and on view at the National Academy Museum in New York through the 22nd of this month.

The show reveals the extent to which abstract painting has engaged social, political, and spiritual issues in its own way. Mary Heilmann introduced a femininist spirit in her boldly colored allusions to handiwork and craft, while Joan Jonas extended painting into performance, addressing the body. All this was happening as Conceptual art, video, and other new forms were emerging.

The exhibition and catalogue capture a pivotal time in American history. In his essay, Reed, a painter, recalls the dynamic, individualistic emergence and cross-fertilization among artists ranging from Joan Snyder and Pat Steir to Lynda Benglis, Mel Bochner, and Dorothea Rockburne. Reed laments how the 1960s and early ’70s refrain of “painting is dead” reflected a misunderstanding of the “innovations in painting and its often conceptual nature.”

Now these innovations are being acknowledged. The work of many of the artists in “High Times,” which also includes Ron Gorchov, Yayoi Kusama, Lee Lozano, Howardena Pindell, and Richard Tuttle, has been appearing in museum and gallery shows, often alongside the work of

younger artists. Boundaries have blurred, and there's a growing anything-goes spirit. "I think the exciting possibilities of 'abstract' painting now have to do precisely with a freedom from labels or categories," says painter Chris Martin, who points out that "anything is possible if it arises out of inner necessity."

Jay Gorney, director of the New York gallery Mitchell-Innes & Nash, has observed that "there seems to be a real interest in abstraction and a real hunger for it among collectors." Gorney recently presented a group show that included work by artists ranging from the reemerging Chris Martin, who was first active in the mid-1980s and was known for his strong, graphic, highly textured, "spiritually" driven paintings, to the recently emerged Alison Fox, whose bright, dynamic canvases take their footprints in still life and landscape into a seductive and distinctive personal abstraction.

Much abstract work today is not overtly political; it doesn't deal with politics or cultural issues as easily as video can, but it does relate more subtly to cultural issues. Annabel Daou speaks of trying to accommodate genre to content. The Lebanese-born New York artist works in a shifting combination of abstraction, conceptualism, and linguistic and numerical jottings, as well as sound. Although the words may be decipherable, they are essentially designed as elements in a land- or thought-scape; the ideas are like abstract forms for viewers to assemble on their own—or not. Her materials—paper, torn and not; tape, fingerprinted or fresh; pencil, smudged or clean; translucent gesso—are simple, accessible, and fragile, and thereby adaptable to different places, situations, and ideas. The work can be seen as literary or political or personal.

Daou poses the question "What is abstraction?" and begins to answer it: "I think abstraction is a mental process where the artist extracts form and creates form. For instance, I looked out my window and saw a window across the street. One frame was slightly off-kilter, and I began to think of an off-kilter grid—and from there, about minor gestures, how the tiny shift in the big grid changed everything. You could take anything as the starting point—abstraction lets you do that. Then it becomes its own world, and it's like being inside the work."

New York gallerist Peter Blum has found that in the last two years collectors in the United States have become increasingly interested in more Minimalist art, particularly work from the 1960s and '70s. "They are looking beyond the major names like Serra and Judd," he says, "and considering other artists who were working at the time and probably even influenced some of the bigger names, as in the case of Judd and David Rabinowitch." Of course, Blum points out, the work is cheaper than that of artists in the Minimalist pantheon.

Another artist who has reemerged is Suzan Frecon, who has been making her style of abstract painting for a number of years. She shows with Blum in New York and Lawrence Markey in San Antonio. Suddenly, she is having major museum shows, with one coming up at the Menil Collection in Houston in September.

Says the Menil exhibition's curator, Josef Helfenstein, "I think she is an extraordinarily interesting and serious painter, sort of a stabilizing force in today's fast-moving and commercially driven art world. Her painting seems almost like an existential way of being an artist; painting really as a form of knowledge, very modern and yet deeply rooted in human history."

Painter David Row—who became known in the 1980s when he showed at John Good Gallery in New York with abstract painters Jacqueline Humphries, Juan Uslé, Nancy Haynes, Stephen Ellis, Jonathan Lasker, and Fiona Rae—acknowledges that he has indeed seen a renewed interest in abstract painting, especially in the last 18 months or so. "One of the things I have

found," he says, "is that there's been a change from abstract art having to deal with its precursors—that is, the three generations before. Now artists tend to be inside the work.

"It becomes a personal thing," he explains. "The conceptual issues fall away."

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