

After the Fall: Aspects of Abstract Painting since 1970 Vol. I



Introduction and Acknowledgements

The subtitle for AFTER THE FALL, *Aspects of Abstract Painting since 1970*, is a carefully crafted phrase that avoids the word *survey* while implying more than a simple compendium. It winks at the futility of summarizing such a vast, diverse field with a mere 133 paintings within a mere 14,000 square feet of exhibition space. From the beginning of the show's development, Lilly Wei and our colleagues at the Newhouse Center, Snug Harbor, wrestled with the agonizing number of laudable artists who would be left out and the pertinent organizing strategies that would be disregarded. By virtue of the depth and diversity of the works ultimately selected, AFTER THE FALL may seem to insinuate its own alternatives, yet unable to entirely give in to the material limits of exhibition. We wanted to give voice

to different artists and different perspectives, to underscore the notion of making and looking at painting as a multifarious form of communication and conversation.

We arrived at the idea to publish a response catalogue. Invitations were extended to approximately 60 individuals with a particular interest in the subject in order to, in the words of curator Lilly Wei, "(describe) another aspect of what abstraction has meant and continues to mean to both its practitioners and its viewers..." We are most honored by those who graciously donated their time to respond to this call. We thank each and every one for indulging us with such generous musings.

Olivia Georgia
director, visual arts
August 1997

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?

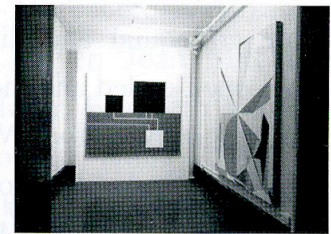
In thinking about frames, I began to think about more metaphorical ones. I thought at first that this show could be essentially unformatted, “unframed,” but it could not; the entire process of organizing an exhibition was of course an enclosure, an interference, a multiple framing.

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.

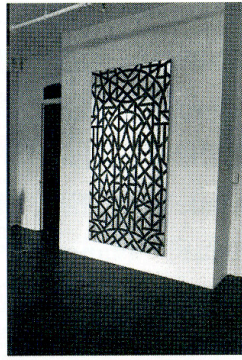
2. *The Frame of External Boundaries*

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*

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.



*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 Tanger, 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.



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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.

Artists in the Exhibition

Jeremy Adams	Christian Haub	George Peck
Clytie Alexander	Nancy Haynes	Katherine Pavlis Porter
Gregory Amenoff	Mary Heilmann	Rebecca Purdum
Polly Apfelbaum	Al Held	David Reed
Jo Baer	Phoebe Helman	Milton Resnick
Frances Barth	Ron Janowich	Dorothea Rockburne
Andrea Belag	Valerie Jaudon	Winston Roeth
Lynda Benglis	Bill Jensen	Stephen Rosenthal
Jake Berthot	Martha Keller	Erik Saxon
James Bishop	Byron Kim	Peter Schuyff
Ross Bleckner	Harriet Korman	Sean Scully
Lawrence Carroll	Janet Kusmierski	Susan Smith
Cora Cohen	Jonathan Lasker	Joan Snyder
David Craven	Marilyn Lerner	Pat Steir
Karin Davie	Margrit Lewczuk	Frank Stella
Stuart Diamond	Robert Mangold	Philip Taaffe
David Diao	Craig Manister	Susanna Tanger
Porfirio DiDonna	Fabian Marcaccio	Denyse Thomasos
Moira Dryer	Suzanne McClelland	Frederic Matys Thursz
Stephen Ellis	Melissa Meyer	Merrill Wagner
Romany Eveleigh	Joan Mitchell	Marjorie Welish
Louise Fishman	John L. Moore	Stephen Westfall
Sam Gilliam	Jill Moser	Jack Whitten
Marcia Hafif	Elizabeth Murray	Joan Witek
Peter Halley	Judith Murray	Robert Yasuda
Mark Harris	Thomas Nonn	
Madeleine Hatz	Thomas Nozkowski	

RON JANOWICH



© MICHEL NGUYEN

Theories form in the space between waves, measuring time in an endless procession of movements, some large, some small, some slow, some fast. When they reach the shore they will vanish without a trace, and return to their source to be reformed in some distant future, and be remembered in some distant past.

Empathy flows through an open gate.
The skin of your eyes has two sides.

Your hands reach for tools, move in motions so predetermined, so unconscious in your heritage.

When you finally imagine a painting being of you, all shadows of residual references fade in a moment of rapid implosion. What remains is the silence that holds the faint unheard noise from the time and place before you came.

The race has started and ended thousands of times; the race has ended and started thousands of times.

Without me
Without you
Celebrate Red, Yellow, and Blue.

In their consciousness of no history, no memory, marks would define their own truth.

Surfaces dissolve one after another.
One after another surfaces dissolve.

VALERIE JAUDON



© AMOS CHAN

Painting is a frame. It acknowledges and represents the philosophical and linguistic boundaries of art itself. The shift taking place today in thinking about abstract painting involves a much larger debate about vision and seeing. To have an exclusively visual experience in the presence of an abstract painting is now understood to be an impossibility. Abstract painting is being transformed by an expanded discourse that acknowledges the significance of language. Language mediates art but it does so at a distance.

In painting today it has become clear that the terms "non-representation" and "non-referentiality" are synonymous with self-referential abstraction. There is, however, a growing awareness that the independence and autonomy of painting are not dependent on self-reference.

We are now conscious of multiple modes of representation. It is no longer necessary to declare our independence from the literal and the literary by setting up representation as abstraction's defining opposite. Abstract painting has much in common with abstract thinking, and abstract thinking is a function of daily life, part of the way we understand and interact with the world. It operates spontaneously and independently of specific systems or disciplines. This understanding gives painting an unexpected potential for renewal and change.

[From *Conceptual Abstraction* (New York: Sidney Janis Gallery, 1991)]



Ron Janowich
Shadows, 1994