

The New York Times

ART REVIEW

Like Watching Paint Thrive

In Five Chelsea Galleries, the State of Painting

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Published: June 28, 2012

Painting is a lot of things: resilient, vampiric, perverse, increasingly elastic, infinitely absorptive and, in one form or another, nearly as old as humankind. One thing it is not, it still seems necessary to say, is dead.

Maybe it appears that way if you spend much time in New York City's major museums, where large group shows of contemporary painting are breathtakingly rare, given how many curators are besotted with Conceptual Art and its many often-vibrant derivatives. These form a hegemony as dominant and one-sided as formalist abstraction ever was.

But that's another reason we have art galleries. Not just to sell art, but also to give alternate, less rigid and blinkered, less institutionally sanctioned views of what's going on.

Evidence of painting's lively persistence is on view in Chelsea in five ambitious group exhibitions organized by a range of people: art dealers, independent curators and art historians. Together these shows feature the work of more than 120 artists and indicate some of what is going on in and around the medium. Some are more coherent than others, and what they collectively reveal is hardly the whole story, not even close. (For one thing there's little attention to figuration; the prevailing tilt is toward abstraction of one sort or another.) A few of the shows take a diffuse approach, examining the ways painting can merge with sculpture or Conceptual Art and yield pictorial hybrids that may not even involve paint; others are more focused on the medium's traditional forms.

All told, these efforts release a lot of raw information into the Chelsea air, creating a messy conversation, a succession of curatorial arguments whose proximity makes it easy to move back and forth among them, sizing up the contributions of individual artists as well as the larger ethos.

Everyday Abstract — Abstract Everyday

A good place to start thinking about the expansive possibilities of painting is this show at the James Cohan Gallery, one that is not explicitly about painting but that nonetheless includes a lot of works of a definite pictorial nature. Organized by Matthew Higgs, director of the alternative space White Columns, it charts a literal-minded kind of abstraction that uses common materials and, often, painting as a jumping-off point.

Representing 37 artists, the show reaches into the past for Hannah Wilke's small, delicate chewing-gum reliefs from 1975 that are evocative of female genitalia, and for an Andy Warhol 1978 "Oxidation Painting," its gaudy green-gold splatters achieved by having his assistants urinate on canvasses covered with copper paint.

Recent efforts include paintinglike wall pieces like Alexandra Bircken's striped rectangles of crocheted yarn (a skeletal homage to Robert Rauschenberg's "Bed"?) and Bill Jenkins's wire bed frame threaded through with short snakes of rope (Jackson Pollock?). There are works that suggest three-dimensional

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paintings, including a thick pylon of bright bundled fabric by Shinique Smith and a free-standing sheaf of painted fabric and paper by Nancy Shaver.

Other standouts include Udomsak Krisanamis's 1996 "Acid Rain," a swirling painting-collage of black and white; Gedi Sibony's "The Two Simple Green Threes," whose stenciled motif suggests a rehearsal for a quilt; and a painting on paper by David Hammons in which splashes of pink Kool-Aid evoke the nearby Warhol. There are lots of illuminating connections to be drawn among the works here.

Context Message

The robust, even wholesome physicality of Mr. Higgs's show finds its complement in "Context Message," at Zach Feuer, a rather more barbed presentation of what I would call painting, quasi-painting and anti-painting. With works by about 40 artists (including some collectives and collaborations), the show has been organized by Tyler Dobson and Ben Morgan-Cleveland, two young artists who run the small, forward-looking gallery Real Fine Arts in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

It starts off winningly. At its center hang two beautiful quilts, one by Lola Pettway, the other by Mary Lee Bendolph and Ruth P. Mosely, all from the acclaimed quilters' collective of Gee's Bend, Ala. The works surrounding these two amazing pictorial objects oscillate erratically among the ironic, the sincere, the subversive and the snarky.

R. H. Quaytman, known for cool photo-based works, contributes a small, sweet but rather generic oil portrait of her husband. The great blues guitarist and self-taught painter John Fahey (1939-2001) is represented by a lively gestural abstraction.

The canvasses of Merlin Carpenter, Bjarne Melgaard and Michael Krebber all add fairly obvious twists to ironic art-world self-reference with images and texts copied from the Internet. In between, paintings by Alistair Frost, Margaret Lee and Michele Abeles, David Diao and Martin Kippenberger all reward attention.

This show never quite comes together, but that may be its point. Its scrappy waywardness gives a vivid picture of the general unruliness in and around painting right now.

Painting in Space

A similar lack of focus afflicts this show at Luhning Augustine, but not quite so fruitfully. Packed with well-known names, it is a benefit exhibition for the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., and has been organized by Tom Eccles, the center's executive director, and Johanna Burton, director of its graduate program. Among the 26 artists here the three who explore the show's titular theme most actively are Martin Creed, represented by a big latticelike red wall painting; Rachel Harrison, whose bright, patchily painted plastic-foam sculpture comes with a length of searing orange carpet; and Liam Gillick, the subject of a show that opened at Bard last weekend, whose spare painted metal sculptures suggest geometric paintings extruded into space.

Otherwise, videos and sculptures by Tony Oursler, Pipilotti Rist, Haim Steinbach, Mark di Suvero, John Handforth and others mainly squander an interesting concept: Just about anything seems to qualify as "painting in space." Paintings of a more wall-bound, canvas-based sort, by artists like Josh Smith, Amy Sillman, Glenn Ligon and Sarah Morris, range through current abstraction, but that's not the same.

Stretching Painting

The 10 artists in "Stretching Painting" at Galerie Lelong don't so much push the medium into space as meddle with its physical properties at close quarters, on the wall.

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Sometimes the exercise is disarmingly simple, as with the magnified brushwork and pale colors (diluted with plaster) of Alex Kwartler's two large paintings on plywood. Sometimes it is startlingly obsessive, as with the work of Gabriel Pionkowski, a young artist who unravels canvas, colors the individual threads and partly reweaves them into stripes or jacquardlike patterns; or Donald Moffett's wildly suggestive combinations of furlike paint surfaces on emphatically perforated wood.

Kate Shepherd and Jim Lee indicate new possibilities for the modernist monochrome. Assembled by Veronica Roberts, a New York-based curator and scholar, the works here can sometimes feel a bit small-bore. This is relieved by Patrick Brennan's "Boomtown (A long road home)," a big, bristling collage festooned with small paintings, and Lauren Luloff's "Flame Violent and Golden," which seems pieced together from textile remnants that are actually hand-painted on different scraps of cloth, using bleach. It has some of the scenery-chewing exuberance of Julian Schnabel, which is quite refreshing.

The Big Picture

A penchant for small, modestly-scaled works that is often evident in these shows is at its most extreme at Sikkema Jenkins in "The Big Picture," a slyly titled show of works by eight artists whose efforts rarely exceed 20 inches on a side.

An implication here is that small is not only beautiful but also might actually be radical, or at least anti-establishment, in a time of immense, often spectacular artworks. Another suggestion is that there remains plenty to be done with paint applied to small, flat rectangular surfaces.

These arguments are made effectively and repeatedly, whether by Jeronimo Elespe's "Segundo T," whose scratched patterns suggest a text or a textile as much as a painting; Merlin James's resplendent "Yellow," which simply pulses with small, well-placed blooms of color; or Ann Pibal's latest, more forthright collusions of brushy and hard-edged abstraction. Through quietly inspired brushwork alone, David Schutter breathes his own kind of life into landscape-suggestive monochromes, while John Dilg brings the canvas weave to bear, almost pixelatedly, on his cartoon-visionary landscapes.

Robert Bordo, Josephine Halvorson and Ryan McLaughlin all make the case that art exists foremost for close looking and internalized experience and nothing does this better than painting. Other mediums can do it just as well, if we're lucky, but not better.

For the moment three solo exhibitions supplement the conversation among these group shows in nearly mutually exclusive ways. In Cheyney Thompson's installation (through Saturday) at Andrew Kreps (525 West 22nd Street) postwar gestural abstraction and Conceptual Art collide to bracing effect in a series of gaudy but weirdly methodical canvasses of identical height whose widths are proportioned to the walls on which they are displayed; never has Mr. Thompson's sardonic skepticism about painting and its processes looked so fierce or decorative.

At Derek Eller (615 West 27th Street) André Ethier's small canvasses (also through Saturday) mine the overlap between modernist and folk painting with a vibrant insouciance and could easily have been included in the Sikkema Jenkins show. And in her Manhattan gallery debut at Thomas Erben (526 West 26th Street) Whitney Claflin presents, through July 28, busily painted, also small canvasses enhanced by collage-poems, jewelry, sewn patches and feathers; they announce painting's ability to absorb all comers in a whisper that is also a joyful shout.

A version of this review appeared in print on June 29, 2012, on page C23 of the New York edition with the headline: Like Watching Paint Thrive.