

Why Paint a Painting at the End of the 20th Century?

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I have been an abstract painter for about twenty-five years. I also teach painting and drawing at Hofstra University. For the past several years, I have been mulling over the situation of painting, particularly abstract painting, from the perspective of being both an artist and a teacher. My assessment of painting's situation as we approach the 21st century is fairly pessimistic: in terms of influence on contemporary culture, painting has been marginalized, a wallflower at the postmodern art party. To take two prominent examples, the lists of last year's finalists for the contemporary art world's two Oscar-like awards, the Turner Prize in Britain and the Hugo Boss Prize handed out by the Guggenheim Museum, included not a single painter. In fact, for many artists—painters and non-painters alike—it is quietly acknowledged that painting's impact on the culture is nil. At best, painting is seen as an esoteric activity for a few painting diehards. At worst, it is considered elitist, a part of the oppressor culture of dead white European males. There is no ques-

tion but that painting is a feeble vehicle for addressing a contemporary audience attached to movies, TV, and computers. The only question is whether there is any audience whatsoever left for painting, and if there is, how to preserve it into the 21st century.

The title of my essay should actually be rephrased to read, "Why paint an *abstract* painting at the end of the 20th century?" The bulk of my discussion is restricted to abstract painting, in order to focus the question on the structure of painting—on why we should continue to paint still objects called paintings when there are now so many more visually powerful media available. And by limiting myself to abstract painting, in which an entire invented flat reality is built of color, surface, shape, traces of the hand, evidence of mistakes and changes, etc., I am going for broke. I am defending the most difficult-to-understand and irrelevant kind of painting that exists.

In defending abstract painting, I must first toss overboard some excess baggage. I take

as my model the iconoclastic abstract painter Ad Reinhardt, who thought that the claims of the Abstract Expressionists in the '40s and '50s amounted to therapeutic poppycock. In order to give painting back its dignity, he set forth, both in his own paintings, and in a series of "dogmatic" statements, exactly what abstract painting is not. In that spirit, and in order to clear the ground of unreasonable expectations for abstract painting, here is my estimate of what abstract painting is *not*.

1. First, abstract painting is *not* a vehicle for social or political change, even if its pioneers thought so. Today, even if a *figurative* painter paints a picture which argues a particular social or political point of view, its impact, socially speaking, is ridiculously small. Its possibilities are even weaker with abstract painting.

2. Second, abstract painting is *not* avant garde. It was in 1915, but it isn't any more. In terms of shocking anybody—the rallying cry of the now defunct avant-garde-painting is feeble when compared to the power of photography, film, video, and interactive computer images.

3. Third, abstract painting is *not*, and most likely never will be, widely popular. Yes, its pioneers—Malevich, Kandinsky, Mondrian—all held utopian hopes for its universal appeal, but they were proved poignantly wrong. Abstract painting turned out to be too subtle, too self-referential, too slow, too demanding of the viewer's patience, and too easy to poke fun at.

4. Finally, abstract painting cannot offer much of what I call "Deep Hidden Meaning," in

the way that religion or philosophy can. Put bluntly, it cannot substitute for the loss of God that marks modernism. Indeed, its ability to move people to tears is weaker than other arts like music, theater, novels, or poetry.

So these are all the things abstract painting cannot do. On the other hand, here's what abstract painting *can* do.

1. First, it offers what I'll call "Little Hidden Meaning." In the presence of a viewer who can look at a still image (for some, a difficult prospect) and who is knowledgeable enough to place the painting in a context of the tradition as a whole, abstract painting offers a de facto philosophical point of view on life. It doesn't "prove" that view, but it offers it. There is a mistaken notion, coming from our lingering attachment to Romanticism and our own narcissistic age, that abstraction is always about self-expression. In the broadest sense it is, of course, but it is also about ideas—the complex struggle between order and chaos, for example, or how the flux of the organic world modifies the rigor of geometry.

2. Second, abstract painting can enable us to be quiet. François Truffaut, who died in 1993, created a character in his last movie "The Little Thief," who brought a roomful of people dancing wildly to rock and roll music to a complete standstill by bellowing at them to be quiet so that he and his wife could dance a slow waltz. Abstract painting makes for a quiet room, allowing for a slow waltz.

3. A third virtue of abstract painting is that it offers something against the glut of things. Of course, paradoxically, an abstract painting is

itself a thing, a part of the material world. But it reminds people of a world without things. It suggests the old idea, now barely remembered, that there might be a hidden, underlying, constant order to this world which the transience of life's things can't affect.

4. Fourth, abstract painting is often beautiful, although this kind of assertion is subject to tremendous dispute. Many artists are, rightly, suspicious of the very idea of the beautiful because it so easily petrifies into something rigid. Once locked into place, "beauty" obliterates the wide array of subtle varieties to it. Artists from the birth of modernism on have substituted the pursuit of beauty with the pursuit of truth-truth to perception, truth to form, truth to materials. In addition, *politics* surrounds beauty, making it difficult to talk directly about it: For many, notions of the beautiful are simply "cultural constructs" which are used by dominant cultures to suppress "the other." Most problematic of all, folded up and hidden within the notion of "beauty" are conflicting values. Beauty implies an *inequality* in the way things look. If there is beauty, there is ugly, and everything else in between. This kind of "ranking" (from the beautiful to the ugly) is based on the inequality of the way things look. And it offends our democratic sense of justice because we moderns have have defined justice as that which approximates most closely "equality." Most of us will not yield an inch on our commitment to equality. Even so, some people can't help themselves, and are struck dumb by how utterly beautiful an abstract painting can be.

5. A fifth virtue of Abstract painting is that

it is *not* a story and *not* part of the most readily accessible side of culture, which is all stories. Many non-abstract painters have picked up on this aspect of our culture, and inserted stories or narratives into their paintings. Today we are bombarded by endless stories, albeit sometimes incomprehensible, from Oprah to CNN, advertisements, novels, movies and virtual reality games. All of us make up stories every day just by trying to make lively conversation. We are constantly teaching and preaching, persuading and dissuading. We are smothered in narratives or suggested narratives that assault us from all sides. Abstract painting resists narration and presents itself all at once, as a whole or a oneness which cannot and never will tell a story.

6. A final virtue of abstract painting is its very un-camera-like, un-computer-like nature. The camera is so powerful that many people have reached the point where they can only see the world photographically or cinematically, and have lost the ability to see it other ways. And it will not be long before people will only see the world digitally.

In sum, what abstract painting offers us at the end of the 20th century is a useless non-story, a non-blinking hanging-there thereness, without any reference other than to itself and its own tradition. It defies translation into data, information, entertainment, rational image or any kind of narrative. It presents an ineffable balance of sensation, experience and knowledge. In the midst of a world in which everything we see is morphing into something else, abstract painting is one of the few things left

that allows us to see the possibility of something remaining constant.

If what I am saying about the virtues of abstract painting is true, then why isn't there more interest in abstract painting? It won't do to begin listing all the abstract painters that are around, because the point is that relatively little attention is paid to them. Where are the exhibitions? And where are the young and passionate abstract painters? How is it that abstract painting, a central player of 20th-century art, has arrived at the point where it is barely a contender? And indeed how is it that painting in general, not just abstract painting, has arrived at this point?

I suggest that the answer is rooted in two irrevocable changes that took place in the 19th century: First, the invention of photography in 1839, and second, the general upheaval in philosophy. The invention of photography rather rapidly allowed anybody, even someone who had no drawing or painting skills, to fix an image of the real world onto a flat surface quickly and accurately, according to the appearance of reality as light falls across objects and is recorded through a single lens. This meant that the painter suddenly looked irrelevant and slow in his method of replicating the natural appearance of reality.

More important, photography threw into question the whole nature of painting. For if the camera was recording the world objectively through light rays bouncing off objects, painting, by comparison, looked subjective. Painting suddenly looked *fictive*. So if painters couldn't compete with the camera in mimicking

the appearance of reality, they would assert an alternative objective truth: All individual *perceptions* are true—at least to the perceiver—and therefore equally valid. Impressionist artists in the 1870s and '80s, for all their stylistic differences, shared the conviction that it was the individual artist's perceptions or sensations that were objectively true, and it was these the artist should record when he painted.

That *truth to individual perception* (impressionism) would quickly broaden to become *truth to individual feelings* (expressionism) only reaffirmed the fact that a major shift had occurred. It was a fundamental change in outlook that changed the look of art in the modern age. It was a change from aesthetic *effect*, which relied on artifice—i.e., faking, telling lies—to aesthetic *intent*, which relied on telling the truth, understood by artists as being sincere.

But what would become—in this kaleidoscope of individual "truths"—of beauty? After Darwin and Freud, artists wouldn't concern themselves with it any more, except as a byproduct, or an aside, as they manipulated and played with form. Philosophy tried to come forth with a solution. It would protect beauty by separating it from destructive scientific analysis, and leave it alone as a "subjective" judgment. Philosophy yielded its primary position as objective interpreter of the world to *science*. Science then broke loose, leaving everything else behind, including poor philosophy, as subjective rubble. This rubble reconstituted itself as the stuff of "relativism"—that is, the idea that moral and aesthetic judgments are subject to

continual flux. Relativism had been around at least since Plato, of course, but the modern age marked the victory of the relativist position as the *conventional* societal outlook.

The relativist reply to practically any pretension to universal truth, or beauty, or authority is, in effect, "Oh, yeah?" And the hatchetman of relativism in this regard is irony. To condense an awful lot of the history of 20th-century art into one sentence, the last eighty years have consisted essentially of a battle between the ironists who have reveled in the impossibility of universal truths, and the holdout universalists who've tried to reconstruct classical philosophical truths in a modern visual language. In other words, it's been Duchamp versus Mondrian. And, of course, Duchamp is the winner.

It took a while for Duchamp to win—until the 1960s, when abstract painting was at an inflated high, and Pop Art burst the bubble. Pop Art was Duchamp's smart, witty planted seed, blooming in full a half century later. By simultaneously mocking and celebrating the modern culture of "stuff," Pop made the abstract painter's self-absorbed retreat look both elitist and silly. To be sure, Pop Art consisted mainly of paintings on canvas. But it was a self-destructive kind of painting. Its implied message was that it was the appropriated images that counted, not the way paint was put on the canvas. Painting had always been profoundly centered around the artist's "touch," but now painting was about the content or image.

Since World War II, the culture has been steadily evolving into what we identify as a full-blown "mass culture," where millions of peo-

ple's interests are simultaneously and speedily gratified through popular music, movies, sports and celebrities. Fewer and fewer people care any longer about the strange slow activity called painting. Beginning in the late '60s and early '70s, young artists, drawn to the new art forms of installation, performance, and video art, abandoned painting in droves. They had grown up with TV and rock and roll, they were hip, smart and sharp, they understood and embraced the seductiveness and power of popular culture, and they wanted in on it. The art world was no longer about painting and sculpture.

We have now arrived at a division in the art world: Hip and trendy on the one hand, reclusive and out-of-it on the other. How can abstract painters who want to have an impact on their culture continue in the face of this?

First, they must aggressively separate themselves from popular culture, rather than strive to be bit players on the side. Abstract painters have to become, philosophically speaking, difficult and cantankerous because in order to survive, they must reassert the discredited "*high art / low art*" distinction, and reargue the case for high art—i.e., an art requiring a subtle, sensitive, experienced and even exceptional viewer. They are making paintings which cannot be understood by everyone. They need to admit that to find meaning in abstract painting takes some work and even some help. And finally, they ought to loudly *celebrate*, rather than apologize for, the convention-bound nature of abstract painting. They work within a rectangle, they use paint on canvas,

and they follow a century of established structures of painting. This is the excitement of painting an abstract painting, in fact. the conventions of it establish boundaries and rules, just as in baseball. And just as in baseball, the following of those rules allows for the thrill.

Of course, anything that proposes an alternative to our mass culture is, as I have implied above, often tarred with the label of "elitist." Well, abstract painting *is* elitist and abstract artists should be up front about this. It is *elitist*, but you don't have to stop loving the movies or The X-files or the fights to understand and like it. Nor do you have to be a white male of European royal blood. Yes, it is a product of European culture, but so are airplanes, computers, penicillin and this essay. There have been, and still are, abstract painters, and patrons of abstract painting, of all races and both sexes.

Today, many if not most young artists trying to get a rung up on the art world ladder don't care one whit about painting or its tradition in Western history. In fact, pace the brief fashion for discovering one's "roots," they are not interested in seeing history as something to belong to, or be a part of, or carry forward, and prefer instead to see it as a massive amount of information which is at times "useful" to rummage about in for ironic references, but which is mostly a pain in the neck and best left ignored.

If we pull back from the abyss of Nietzsche's picture of our modern condition, we can take from him one premise: It is history, used correctly, which separates us from the life of dogs, cats and cows. But what exactly is the

correct use of history? People today completely distrust it. They want to know who's doing the telling, and why, because they are convinced that knowledge is a smokescreen for power. Unfortunately, however, it is only when the sincere, non-ironic use of visual history is coupled with the particular desire some people have to make images, that the young artist, in particular, can learn the visual language of painted abstract images and the meaning of abstract painting. Of course, no matter what, some people and even some artists will never "get" abstract painting, for reasons that range from their belief that all art is political to their poor visual aptitude. In the end, abstract painting is going to attract an audience more commensurate with reading the Aeneid in Latin than watching Sarah McLaughlin on MTV.

But small as the audience may be, abstract painting *can* say something about the contemporary culture at large. For as a colleague of mine from Hofstra University, the late Michael Gordon, argued, it sets up a powerful parallel to the moral realm in which we lead our lives. Abstract painters don't start their paintings in a vacuum. Rather, they build on the foundation of historical abstraction. Individual paintings are the result of an accumulation of errors, wrong turns, corrections, and resolutions. Abstract painters paint the way we all lead our lives—building on and rebelling against the givens and choices, the purposeful actions and the accidents. An abstract painting, then, offers the perfect visual metaphor for our individual lives.

I believe it was Oscar Wilde who said that

every man at fifty has the face he deserves. In virtual time and space, there is no fifty-year-old face. Everything is a toggle choice which wipes out the previous smiles or frowns and obliterates any "bad" or "wrong" choices. In a computer image, of course, there no longer exists even the concept of a mistake, since all evidence for it is simultaneously retrievable and destroyable. When we take away the ability to make a real mistake in art, one that can't be wiped out, the final image has no wrinkles. It carries only a thin, stiff veneer, like the continuously lifted, stretched, faces of sixty-five year old Park Avenue matrons. At a quick glance, these ladies look quite fine. But a longer look yields blankness. It is through our errors and indeed our sins, both in art and life, that we gain the capacity for innovative improvisation and possible redemption.

At this point, I will lay aside all my philosophical arguments and simply ask, What should abstract painters do about the current situation?:

1. First, they should concede that they can't compete with the camera, TV, movies and the computer, and refuse to show their paintings in any other context than that of abstract painting. They must be especially vehement in refusing to show their paintings alongside works of art that directly appropriate images from the mass culture, or that move, make noise, or are electronically powered. I am thinking in particular of the disastrous consequences for abstract painting in recent Whitney Biennials. Abstract painters must refuse from here on in to be in the Whitney unless they get

an exhibition *all to themselves*. A withdrawal *en masse* from participation in something that makes artists salivate with desire (in the fiercely competitive art world, exhibiting in the Whitney seems to artists like a rocket launch to the international art orbit) is extremely unlikely. Nevertheless, it is necessary.

2. Second, abstract painters should insist on curators who have proven their knowledge of and sympathy for abstract painting, and refuse to exhibit their work in shows curated by those with other agendas.

Before modernism, painting was the noise in the culture, because it attracted attention. Now the culture is the noise and painting, especially abstract painting, attracts little attention. It attracts little attention in the culture at large and little attention within the subset of what we call the "art world." Its saving virtue today is that it is one of a relatively few quiet spaces within the culture—and within the art world. For there is indeed a cultural crisis at the end of the 20th century. The cultural crisis is the continuous flux of everything, and the death of stillness. Abstract painting cannot change our culture, but neither can installation art, computer art or multi-media appropriation attempts, no matter how smart and savvy they are. Those art forms which appropriate the popular media are doomed to look forever pale in comparison to it, or worse, to be sucked down into its vast black hole. The power of abstract painting is precisely that it is a world beautifully separate from our post-modern, materialistic, morphing, ironic and hip, age.