

What Good is Abstract Painting Now?

Two Coats of Paint, July 6, 2020

<https://www.twocoatsofpaint.com/2020/07/what-good-is-abstract-painting-now.html>

By Laurie Fendrich

Without any bombs exploding or even a shingle shot fired, the world we knew before COVID has gone “poof.” Sure, buildings are intact, trees, grass and flowers still grow, the sky is blue, people walk on streets and drive cars. What’s disappeared, for who knows how long, is the ease and unselfconsciousness with which we walked around and lived our lives. COVID brought out a deep-seated unease, if not dread, that’s all the more terrible because it threatens us immediately (we or people we love might become very ill or even die because of it) as well as in the long run (the life we knew before may never return).

A couple months ago, while self-quarantining because of COVID, I stumbled across an essay, “Confessions of an Abstract Painter” ([web link](#)), that I wrote for *The Chronicle Review* in 2002 when I was in my mid-fifties (in the words of Leonard Cohen, “Just a crazy kid with a dream”). The idea was to talk about abstract paintings as common-sensically as I could so that people who knew nothing about art could get some understanding of what we abstract painters think about when we paint and what we’re aiming to do.

Using myself as an example, I said that what goes on in my studio isn’t all that mysterious but is, in effect, an ordinary activity that has to do with my arranging colored shapes, and that though I didn’t think abstract painting was for everyone, the small pleasure it gave “sensitive” viewers was enough to satisfy a painter like me. Having re-read this essay multiple times over the past few months, I find myself asking whether I still believe that.

As I write this, the virus in the United States has infected close to 2 million people and, as of this writing, killed well over 132,000; cases worldwide are around 11 million, with more than half a million dead. Worse, no one knows where we are with it—the beginning, middle or, as some Republican Pollyannas among us assert, nearly at the end. Some scientists say we should just get used to living with it, for it may never go away. Economies all over the world sputter and spit, while millions of children are in isolation, not going to playgrounds or school and trying to figure out what being a little human being amounts to without ever getting to be with other children or interact with adults other than their parents. Save for orangutans, who wander in solitary isolation, being alone isn't what the rest of us primates are meant to do.

What does COVID mean for the little sub-sub-sub-species of human primates known as abstract painters to which I belong and deeply care about? Although my eyes still face forward in proper primate fashion, the context in which I've always made my art is gone. The art world of galleries and museums, the social artistic life of studio visits, dinners with other artists, openings, lectures and symposia on art, have disappeared or at best are severely diminished. For all those who cheerfully embrace the virtual viewing of abstract paintings on social media and gallery and museum websites, I commend you. But though I do this too, what good is it if I still believe in making and looking at one-of-a-kind works of art that to be fully felt and understood must be seen in the flesh? Abstract painters have never had much of an audience; COVID has made it so we now have practically no audience at all. Because we don't tell stories like figurative painters do, and our art isn't jazzy or high-tech, we're caught in the lonely middle.

I say this because COVID is fraying the community of abstract artists to which many of us feel—however tenuously—we belong. The original Abstract Expressionists c. 1943 felt an isolation and anxiety that was at least as terrible as what we are experiencing today, but consolation lay in their many physical gatherings where bodies bumped against bodies, eyes looked into other eyes, people laughed and argued and fought and yelled at one another, and everyone talked endlessly, face to face, about art.

I began self-isolating in mid-March, and it's clear to me now that COVID isn't making much if any difference to me . . . in the studio. Yes, I order my supplies online instead of browsing the aisles in Soho Art Materials or Utrecht, and yes, any future exhibitions for me are on indefinite

hold. But what I do as an abstract painter in the studio—painting colored shapes—isn't any different for me now than it was last November, or the November before that or the one before that.

Since the racist murder of Charles Floyd, however, I've been compelled to ask, "Do abstract painters get a free pass to keep on painting our abstract paintings instead of doing something in our art that might have some political or social impact?" COVID's fearfulness seems to have altered American minds enough that they see protests over racial inequality as a step toward some kind of national rebirth (two-thirds of the country support Black Lives matter, according to a June Pew poll, and most Americans believe Floyd's killing is "part of a broader pattern of excessive police violence toward African Americans"). Why aren't we abstract painters changing our art in response? To what extent is the moribund legacy of dead, white European males attached to abstract painting, and how do we shake that? To put it more directly, if we aren't part of the solution, aren't we part of the problem?

All contemporary abstract painters are epigonous creatures, for we come at the end of a long line of vigorous forebears, and our colored shapes, lines, circles, triangles, squares, horizontal and vertical stripes, marks, gestures, splats, dots and all the rest are mere footnotes to what came before us. Midgets standing on the shoulders of giants, Bernard of Chartres would have called us. After all, it was the early modernists who explored the wide-open terrain of abstraction, leaving us with only some obscure byways and narrow paths. Now, living in a vigorously woke art world that looks with distrust at our strivings for beauty (forgive me, but for many of us, universal beauty) via abstraction adds yet another layer of worry to our already intense anxiety over whether our paintings mean much anymore to anyone outside our little clutch of abstract painters.

* * * * *

In the 2002 essay I noted that in his novel *Ravelstein*, Saul Bellow quotes his eponymous character (a fictional stand-in for the late political philosopher Allan Bloom) to the effect that it's crucial for human beings to separate themselves from their own era without being entirely alienated from it: "You must not be swallowed up in the history of your own time," Ravelstein

says (paraphrasing the German Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schiller's admonition to, "Live with your century, but do not be its creature").

This is a tall order. It reminds me of the moment in *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth Bennet tells one of her sisters that sitting on the sidelines at a dance philosophically observing all the dancers is all well and good but we can't all be philosophers. I, for one, have a brain flooded with chemicals, hormones and emotions that often come in conflict with my reason. How can I be fully aware of, and participate in, my own times while at the same time remaining detached from them? It's like saying, "Have great sex, but hey, while you're at it, do please make a hand-held video of it."

The most immediate unsettling aspect of COVID for abstract painters is that we're surviving as before. Before COVID, many abstract painters were already scrambling to find ways to both pay the rent and still paint their pictures. We still are. Moreover, because we've painted pictures our whole lives without ever knowing who, precisely, our audience is (ourselves? our artist friends? imagined or bona fide collectors?), it's nothing new to lose an audience. Still, whipsawing between not caring what others think about our work and longing for someone, anyone, to click a metaphorical "like" on images of our paintings, is, as they say, not a good place to be.

We abstract painters are hunkering down in our studios while quietly grieving at the loss of our little community of artists in the same way sequestered pre-school children are grieving the loss of their little playmates. How do we find a purpose for our paintings in the midst of this pandemic? Just as the end game of a shoe is to be on a foot, the end game of a painting is to hang on a wall outside the studio. To say otherwise is to say that painting is mere autotherapy. Which is fine, of course, for those who are satisfied with therapy, but not fine for anyone with any public ambition. Artists love their artists' communities. At the same time, artists strive to stand out from them (which explains why they want to have exhibitions). What Aristophanes said about artists in his play, *The Clouds*—that they're marked by a "longing for applause"—pertains to abstract painters living and working now as much as it did to artists in 5th-century Athens.

With COVID, it's impossible for most abstract painters to see any clear path for moving paintings out of studios to public walls. I think it's now or never for artists to do what they can to

overhaul the 19th- and 20th-century gallery model (for more on this idea, see Barry Schwabsky's, "What Are Galleries For?" in the July 1st issue of *The Nation*) and find a new way to show art. Somewhere in my Groundhog-Day-delirium, I can suss out that the route, especially for abstract artists, involves boycotting art fairs and mega-galleries, and maybe creating more cooperative galleries, made up of truly like-minded abstract painters willing to be hard-assed in judging the quality of the work by all the artists they'll accept in their group. Alas, I haven't gotten any further than this. I leave it to young abstract painters-to figure it out.