ABSTRACT PAINTING REDEFINED

Gregory Amenoff
Dennis Ashbaugh
Francis Barth
Ross Bleckner
Stanley Boxer
Howard Buchwald
Max Cole
Michael Goldberg
George Green
Tom Holland
Ralph Humphrey

Valerie Jaudon
Terence LaNoue
Hugh O’Donnell
Peter Plagens
Joanna Poussette-Dart
Rodney Ripps
Frank Roth
Gary Stephen
Jack Youngerman
Robert Zakanitch

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THE FINE ARTS CENTER ART GALLERY
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK
INTRODUCTION

There has been a rapid succession of art movements in America since the Regionalism and Social Realism of the 30’s and even since the advent of Abstract Expressionism over 40 years ago.

However, the roots of abstract painting are found in the efforts of a group of artists who worked in relative isolation. By its very nature abstract painting today reflects individual development and evolution of one’s own painting.

My primary intent in the selection of artists for this exhibition is to focus upon a group of established abstract painters who have, over a period of years, continued to develop and enlarge their personal vocabularies.

The result is an opportunity to survey an adventurous redefining of the boundaries of abstract painting — the taking of work into fresh new territory.

What is germane here is the notion of redefinition. The evolution of abstract painting comes not from a movement but from individual transformation, a development and expansion of the artist’s unique frame of reference.

In talking with a number of artists in this exhibition, I have noted that there is, engendered in their work, a common occurrence. While there is the pushing or moving into new territory, there are, simultaneously, “pieces” of paintings, elements from one’s personal storehouse, though not necessarily physically, resurfacing and contributing to the end result. The work gets restructured as it gets recycled. The fascination is in the dynamism of this process coupled with the fact that there is inherent in abstract painting the potential for the unorthodox.

Therefore, in this exhibition it is an opportunity and a pleasure to focus in on a particular diverse group of abstract painters at this particular point in time.

I would like to thank the twenty-one artists in the exhibition, the individuals, and the galleries, who have generously agreed to lend their works. In particular, I want to thank Stephen Frailey and Stefano Basilio at Mary Boone Gallery, Christopher Ford and Lindsay Walt at Charles Cowles Gallery, Bayat Keerl at Emmerich Gallery, Sique Spence at Nancy Hoffman Gallery, Carroll Janis at Sidney Janis Gallery, David Robinson at Marlborough Gallery, Evelyn Ellwood and Terri Coppenger at Louis K. Meisel Gallery, John Cheim and Nathan Curnan at Robert Miller Gallery, Ruth Siegel at Ruth Siegel Gallery, Antonio Homem and David Nolan at Sonnabend Gallery, Joan Washburn at Washburn Gallery, and Miami Johnson and Ann Cook at Willard Gallery.

Special thanks to Louis K. Meisel for his enthusiastic support and sponsorship of this exhibition.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank guest curator Cie Goulet for organizing and developing this exhibition. Thanks are also due to Carter Radcliffe for contributing the catalogue essay. I am also grateful to the artists and galleries who are participating in the exhibition. Most of all, I want to express my appreciation to Louis K. Meisel for his continued commitment to abstract painting and for making this exhibition available to the Stony Brook Community.

Thanks are also due to Gary Floyd, Technical Director, and Jay Strivey, Assistant Technical Director, Fine Arts Center, and Pete Pantaleo, for their installation assistance and exhibition lighting; Michael Giangrasso, Arja Hihnala, Ophelia Lopez, David Lukjak, George Olson, Barbara Sant Anna, Art Gallery Assistants, and Louise Landerville, Gallery Intern, for their help with the exhibition.

Rhonda Cooper
Director


Participating Galleries:

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Abstract Painting And
The Idea of Modernity

We are in the habit of treating abstract painting as an exceedingly specialized activity. In fact, it is specialized. As a result, an abstract painter's images offer themselves to the understanding only with a certain degree of hesitation. No matter how visually alluring these objects may be, they are resistant. There is obvious pleasure to be taken in a painting's rich textures, allusive forms, subtly deployed colors. The meaning of these pictorial traits is not so obvious. We only begin to make sense of an abstract painting after we've familiarized ourselves somewhat with its history. Even then one's preparation is no help at all in the absence of those particularly sharp intuitions that arrive unbidden and are not always available when we're face to face with an abstract canvas. And when one does grasp an abstract painter's intention, it seems difficult to talk about it in any but the most awkward terms.

So there are several reasons for considering abstract painting an extremely specialized endeavor. Not only does it require us to be familiar with a highly focused history, but abstraction demands that we approach it in an especially responsive state of mind and feeling. Most important, the meanings it offers are so thoroughly entwined with a visual medium, paint on canvas, that they refuse to be translated into speech, so we apply labels. Meanwhile, the object of all this language adamantly refuses to compromise. Figurative painting at least gives us some people to speculate about — perhaps even a narrative. Abstraction does not.

Having said all that, I would like to suggest that it presents at most a series of partial truths. Yes, there is a sense in which abstract painting is a very specialized — hence isolated — kind of art. On the other hand, I believe that serious abstraction of the kind gathered together for this exhibition engages the least specialized, the most widely pertinent questions of our culture. This is easy to overlook (in other words, it is convenient to relegate abstraction to exceedingly narrow grounds) precisely because it conveys its significance in so thoroughly visual a manner. The strength of this kind of art, a dedication to the visual that verges on absolutism, is at the same time the critic's rationale for talking around the deep purposes of abstract painting. I am not rash enough to deny that I too must circle around abstraction, never quite getting at the point. Perhaps, though, I'll be able to find a different path for my wandering.

I mentioned at the outset the need for a sense of an abstract painter's esthetic origins. We really only begin to see an abstract painting when it appears against the backdrop of its own history. Let me stress the singular nature of such histories. One of the privileges of belonging to the modernist tradition — indeed, to the tradition that began about two centuries ago, at the outset of the modern world — is that it gives the artist the right to choose his or her own ancestors. Every ambitious painter draws up an entirely personal family tree, and of course it helps the viewer a great deal to know that genealogy at least in rough outline.

We might get cues to meaning from a knowledge that, three decades ago, Jack Youngerman learned much from the textures of Willem de Kooning's painterly style. As Youngerman's art evolved away from its origins, the surfaces of his canvases grew steadily smoother. In recent seasons he returned to heavy textures, an option he has made distinctively his own. But to chart this pattern is not to generate meaning. Nonetheless, criticism spends a sizable portion of its energy on that sort of chart-making. Long after stylistic clues have grown cold, the critic continues to follow them deeper and deeper into the past. Baffled by the meaning of an artwork, a text, whatever, we find in retrospect a substitute for understanding. And this substitute is all the more persuasive because some historical knowledge is necessary. Why not, then, convince ourselves that such knowledge, if only it could be made complete, would unravel every mystery we face?
Hence the kind of art criticism that sounds like art history at its most obsessively detailed. Though art history has a remarkable capacity for tedium, few wish to ignore it. It is not easy to give up our historizing talk, even here in this exhibition, where the power of these singular presences, these paintings, gives us so much inducement to do so. History has an abiding glamor. The idea of the avant-garde, and of Romanticism before it, was intimately entangled with a faith in the historical imagination. Artists and writers were only reflecting, sometimes in a feverish manner, assumptions common throughout the culture. The modernity introduced by late eighteenth-century revolution — political, social, industrial — defined itself in part as a new power to map historical currents as they appeared, and thus direct them. A grasp of the past gave control over the future. Historical studies were prologue to progress. All this was delusory. History is as elusive for us as for anyone. Yet the modern belief in the power to analyze and thus control historical change has had extraordinary consequences — and not just for art.

Yet art makes the effects of this new attitude toward history easiest to see. Though it is routine to say that the avant-garde is dead, many of us still maintain the avant-garde faith that the patterns of history, fully envisioned, can provide clues to its own management. Thus the belief persists in the art world that at any moment there is a historically correct way to make a painting — a method of deploying one’s pictorial options that results, inevitably, in historical significance. Cie Goulet’s selections confound this belief, which is harmful because it encourages us to look, not for the meaning of a work of art, but for the clues to a historical puzzle that the work may or may not hide. This exhibition encourages us to confront paintings as singular presences, not as difficult patches in a chart of stylistic development. But it is nearly impossible to give up the faith that problems of deep meaning will take care of themselves if we just figure out where this or that canvas fits into the diagram of post-war American art.

Al Held moved, by stages, from painterly painting, which demands that the viewer read every nuance left by the touch of every bristle of the brush, to painting with a smooth, pristine surface. Included in this show is a painter whose development crosses Held’s. Robert Zakanitch first gained notice as a painter of hard-edged images. A strongly right-angled, gridded order still underlies his patterns, but the point to be made here is that those patterns are painterly. His suggestions of grids read as lattices because he turned from the geometric precision of his 1960s to a present inhabited by floral energies. For historical readings to make sense, history has to be, so to speak, absorbitive...It has to carry an entire population along with it. But Cie Goulet has assembled here a population of painters who, every last one of them, refuse to be absorbed into any collective — historical, stylistic, ideological. Zakanitch’s present is not Held’s, so there is something arbitrary about suggesting that they cross paths as they move toward this moment. If past and present don’t mean the same for them, it’s unlikely that “painterly” and “hard-edged” mean the same, either.

I think it must be because she is a painter herself that Cie Goulet was able to bring together twenty-one abstract painters who resist all the convenient historical cliches. As an artist, she lays traps for criticism with an intuitive flair. And perhaps because she is a figurative artist, she is particularly adept when she exercises her flair on behalf of abstraction. It is very useful to see the way Howard Volwald’s seeming system of pictorial options generates a variety of unbreachable complexities, while not far away the atmosphere of chaos in Gregory Ameroff’s painting coalesces into a spectacle of order. Buchwald arrives at painting by way of conceptual art. Ameroff’s origins, it seems to me, are theatrical — even operatic. We could set up a variety of historical patterns, a network of connections anchored in reputable oppositions (painterly-expressionist/geometrical-conceptual) to catch these artists. But they would slip through. The purpose of most exhibitions is to justify historical labels, so they try to disguise the inadequacies of the labeling process. The value of this show begins with the curator’s ability to confound that process and thus call our routine analyses into question.

Most of the painters in this exhibition can be fitted into the narrow regions marked off by stylistic labels. Yet they don’t stay put very well. There are “Neo-Expressionist” traits in Rodney Rippy’s painting, yet a close look discovers something odd. There is as much of a painterly, expressionist nature in Robert Zakanitch’s canvas as there is in Rippy’s. Zakanitch is, of course, standardly tagged a “pattern painter.” Then there is Ralph Humphrey, who once seemed close to painters like Robert...

George D. Green
Kingdom Come. 1984
Acrylic on canvas, 91 x 76
Courtesy Louis K. Meisel Gallery
Jaudon’s patterns evoke architecture, while Terence LaNoue’s colors and textures suggest not pictures of landscape and buildings, but maps of sparsely built-up terrain. These are hints of pictures, not images that refer directly to the world. And while it is important to see that such hints are particularly strong in the abstract painting that appeared after the recent flurry of figurative painting, it is even more important to remember that such hints were there to be seen much earlier on — in pattern painting, especially.

The zigzag development of art is not new. Yet it is only now that we are beginning to notice it, and to give up our faith in a straight-line progress of art. A clear linear advance would be so much more convenient, if only we could still believe in it fully. But what happens to the stylistic analysis of art, if the best abstract painting of our moment tends, whether consciously or not, to mock the image of a unified art movement directly into the future? This show inspires me to wonder if there is — or every was — such a thing as an art movement, save for the convenience of the art world. (Other than Monet, how many Impressionists — genuine Impressionists — were there?) But if faith in progress collapses, it is nearly impossible to sustain the early modern belief that there is something redemptive about modernity itself. With esthetic progress stalled or revealed as a delusion, all of art criticism’s standard topics fall in ruin. Gloomily, we sift through the rubble of our ideas, our rhetoric. And why not? Rather, what else is there to do? Abstract art is so specialized that even its figurative suggestions resist language. This reduces the critic to a specialist in talking around his subject.

Yet, as I suggested at the outset, the specialized, isolated quality of abstract art is not merely a difficulty for the serious viewer. It is also the source of abstraction’s profound significance and a clue to the possibility of redefining modernity so that it doesn’t seem to end when our faith in simple, straight-ahead progress comes to a halt. First of all, we must learn to see the resistant, self-enclosed quality of abstract painting as something positive. We must learn to look at these paintings, not past them to their places in stylistic and historical categories that subordinate them to a lingering hope of esthetic progress. The physical presence of a successful abstract painting defies that attempted subordination. A canvas of this kind insists that it is here, in front of you, not to be absorbed into a play of critical language. And it doesn’t always make the point in the most ingratiating manner — or, at least, not right away. The surface of Valerie Jaudon’s painting has the allure of gold leaf. The eye finds a comparable richness in the molded patterns of Terence LaNoue’s work, but first it is necessary to adapt one’s eye to a faintly industrial-looking departure from the usual appearance of paint on canvas. Then LaNoue’s painting reveals its singular variety of lushness.

Singularity is the point, and it is troubling. Each of the paintings in this show accepts the premises, the stylistic givens, of abstract painting only to transform them. Thus each of these works is a spectacle of willfulness, the emblem of a self that refuses to adapt to a collective program. Further, these works are mute. Of course,
painting is a silent medium. But a figurative canvas can have a quality of mime, of silent speech. And an abstraction can, as so many still do, exemplify some esthetic program by presenting painted imagery with an invisible (but well-established) text attached. Cie Goulet has picked twenty-one paintings that are not only silent in the way that such objects must be silent; they also reject any of painting’s substitutes for speech. Thus they are surrogates for artists who refuse to take part in our usual conversations about art. And that refusal is a positive thing, for it sheds a bright light on modernity.

Faced with these images that confound all our routine notions about modern progress toward an esthetically correct future, we might consider the possibility that progress was never the point. Rather, that for all its energizing effects and numerous benefits, progress was a distraction from modernity’s deepest concern: legitimacy. Inspired in part by progressive ideologies, revolution swept away the ancient regime, leaving it unclear who or what had the legitimate authority to endow with meaning our social existence and the things of our culture. Modernity has been a struggle over the question of authentic meaning, a struggle that ranges far beyond the precincts of art. Yet artists have always been at the heart of the modern attempt to establish legitimacy because, with the failure of academic ideals, all but the most timid found themselves in isolation, with no institutional support. Their response, which we label Romanticism, was to insist that legitimate meaning arrives not from institutions like academies but from the artist’s inwardness — the “creative imagination,” as Samuel Taylor Coleridge called it.

Though the avant-garde left Coleridge’s terminology behind, it accepted the creative imagination, along with its prerogatives. And some avant-gardists tried to adjust their singular imaginations to large, institutionalized programs of esthetic progress (the Bauhaus, for example, or Russian Constructivism). But I think it is fair to say that the best artists of the early avant-garde did not. Like the painters represented here, they insisted that meaning of a legitimate kind is not programmatic. It originates not in institutions but with the individual — particularly, with those individuals like painters who insist on rendering the origins of meaning conscious, whose work consists of advancing that consciousness.

Thus, selves and institutions are the protagonists in the struggle over the question of legitimacy. This struggle, I think, defines the modern era. It was thought by some that progressive esthetics could reconcile the self to bureaucratic structure of the kind that attempts to absorb and control selfhood. But this was not the case. The question of progress in art arises chiefly as a distraction, as a topic designed to obscure the conflict between individual and institutional interests. Our strongest artists now confront us with the resistance, the unyielding singularity that we find in the paintings of this show. In this light, abstraction is a means of defying generality as it tries to manipulate the specific — that is, the individuality symbolized by each of these aggressively distinctive works of art.

We should not be so naive as to suppose that any artist is a match, in wordy terms, for even a miniature institution. But I think we should acknowledge that one of culture’s most important functions, perhaps its primary function, is to generate meanings. In the symbolic realm where that occurs, art is indeed powerful, but only if artists insist on their prerogatives. The painters in this show do that. Hence this gathering of their works produces a paradox: insofar as these paintings are all different, authentically so, they are all the same: emblems of selves determined to resist the claims to legitimacy made by institutions in institutional language. Each of these paintings presents a language — rather, a resistance to language, a luminous muteness — entirely its own.

Carter Ratcliff
February 1985

1. The division between “abstract” and “figurative” is sometimes so arbitrary that the words lose their meaning. Yet they can’t be avoided. Here I intend “abstract” to refer, simply, to paintings that have no readily identifiable motif, while the imagery of “figurative” painting is the opposite: filled with such things as landscape, recognizable objects and, indeed, human figures.
EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Artists are listed in alphabetical order. All dimensions are given in inches, height preceding width preceding depth.

Gregory Amenoff (St. Charles, Illinois; 1948)
Knocking at the Threshold, 1982
Oil on canvas, 78 x 74 inches
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, NYC

Dennis Ashbaugh (Red Oak, Iowa; 1946)
Feeling Smashin, 1983
Mixed media on canvas, 72 x 72 inches
Lent by the artist

Frances Barlh (New York, New York; 1946)
Feathered Red, 1984
Acrylic and gesso on wood relief, 55 x 37 x 1 1/2 inches
Lent by the artist

Ross Bleckner (New York, New York; 1949)
Untitled, 1984
Oil on canvas, 29 1/2 x 35 1/2 inches
Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, NYC

Stanley Boxer (New York, New York; 1926)
Throbrasbloom, 1984
Oil on linen, 46 1/2 x 47 1/2 inches
Courtesy Andre Emmerich Gallery, NYC

Howard Buchwald (New York, New York; 1943)
A Fashionable Dissolution, 1983
Oil on linen, 70 x 63 inches
Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery, NYC

Max Cole (Kansas, 1937)
Unkar, 1984
Acrylic on canvas, 52 x 92 inches
Lent by the artist

Michael Goldberg (New York, New York; 1924)
Codex Ca Boso — N.Y. II, 1982-83
Mixed media on canvas, 80 x 60 inches
Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, NYC

George D. Green (Portland, Oregon; 1943)
Kingdom Come, 1984
Acrylic on canvas, 91 x 76 inches
Courtesy Louis K. Meisel Gallery, NYC

Tom Holland (Seattle, Washington; 1936)
Roman, 1983
Epoxy on fiberglass, 78 x 53 x 4 inches
Courtesy Charles Cowles Gallery, NYC

Ralph Humphrey (Youngstown, Ohio; 1932)
Rain, 1983-84
Casein and modeling paste on wood, 48 x 48 inches
Courtesy Willard Gallery, NYC

Valerie Jaudon (1945)
Sebastapol, 1982
Gold leaf and oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches
Courtesy Louis K. Meisel Gallery, NYC

Terence LaNoue (Hammond, Indiana; 1941)
Antarctica, 1984
Mixed media, 70 3/4 x 73 1/2 inches
Courtesy Ruth Siegel Gallery, NYC

Black Arrow, 1982
Oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches
Courtesy Marlborough Gallery, NYC

Peter Plagens (Dayton, Ohio; 1941)
The Cathedral of Work, 1984
Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 84 inches
Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery, NYC

Joanna Pousette-Dart (New York, New York; 1947)
Untitled, 1984
Oil on canvas, 42 x 36 inches
Lent by the artist

Rodney Rips (New York, New York; 1950)
Canyon (The Field), 1984
Oil and wax on linen, 61 x 48 x 5 inches
Courtesy Marisa del Re Gallery, NYC

Frank Roth (Boston, Massachusetts; 1936)
A Perfect Corner, 1983
Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 60 inches
Courtesy Louis K. Meisel Gallery, NYC

Gary Stephen (Brooklyn, New York; 1942)
Millions of Anything, 1984
Acrylic, oil, and wood on canvas, 70 x 91 inches
Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, NYC

Jack Youngerman (Louisville, Kentucky; 1926)
Lykos, 1983
Oil, epoxy, polystyrene, and fiberglass, 95 x 66 x 4 inches
Courtesy Washburn Gallery, NYC

Robert S. Zakanitch (Elizabeth, New Jersey; 1935)
Tucked In, 1982
Acrylic on canvas, 89 x 72 inches
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, NYC

Howard Buchwald
A Fashionable Dissolution, 1983
Oil on linen, 70 x 63"
Courtesy Nancy Hoffman Gallery
PREVIOUS EXHIBITIONS AT THE ART GALLERY

1975 FACULTY EXHIBITION

1976 MICHELLE STUART
RECENT DRAWINGS (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS EXHIBITION)
SALVATORE ROMANO

1977 MEL PEKARSKY
JUDITH BERNASTEIN
HERBERT BAYER (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS EXHIBITION)

1978 LEON GOLUB
WOMEN ARTISTS FROM NEW YORK
JANET FISH
ROSEMARY MAYER
THE SISTER CHAPEL

1979 SHIRLEY GORELICK
ALAN SONNIST
HOWARDEN PINDELL
ROY LICHTENSTEIN

1980 BENNY ANDREWS
ALEX KATZ
EIGHT FROM NEW YORK
ARTISTS FROM QUEENS
OTTO PIENE
STONY BROOK 11, THE STUDIO FACULTY

1981 ALICE NEEL
55 MERCER 10 SCULPTORS
JOHN LITTLE
IRA JOEL HABER
LEON POLK SMITH

1982 FOUR SCULPTORS
CECILE ABISH
JACK YOUNGERMAN
ALAN SHIELDS
THE STONY BROOK ALUMNI INVITATIONAL
ANN MCCOY

1983 THE WAR SHOW
CERAMIC DIRECTIONS: A CONTEMPORARY OVERVIEW
CINDY SHERMAN
THE FACULTY SHOW

1984 BEINARD APTKAAR ART AND POLITICS
ERIC STALLER LIGHT YEARS
NORMAN BLUM: SEVEN FROM THE SEVENTIES
EDWARD COUNTRY 1921-1984
CARL ANDRE: SCULPTURE

1985 LEWIS HINE IN EUROPE: 1918-1919
FRANCESC TORRES: PATHS OF GLORY
HOMAGE TO BOLOTOWSKY, 1933-1961
FREEDOM WITHIN: PAINTINGS BY JUAN SANCHEZ/INSTALLATION BY ALFREDO JAAR

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK
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art gallery

Director ................................................. PHONDA COOPER