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Presence Past and Reverie Future: Thoughts on Recent Abstract Painting

The anonymous sign read “Pretty Pictures Never Solved a Problem,” and it would be fair to suppose it was intended as some kind of critique of esthetics in the name of ethics. But to that sign, I still wanted to add “they never pretended to do so, either,” so that I could make the point that a disinterest in ethics is still ethically superior to pretending to be concerned about ethics in the name of personal or interest-group self-aggrandizement. During the past decade of political and financial tumult, we have seen a lot of art engaged in such pretenses, be it labeled “institutional critique,” “social-practices,” or the ever-popular “relational esthetics,” all of which in their own way tried to feel the world’s pain as a prelude to exaggerating their own claims of importance in the greater scheme of things. Good thing the Wall Street protesters didn’t get bogged down in any of these art world conceits, lest they, too, fall victim to being programmatically ineffectual.

Now the stage is set for the claim that this article seeks to make, which is that there seems to be some new energy percolating in the much-maligned world of “pretty pictures,” that is, abstract painting called by that and other unfairly dismissive names. Of course, anyone with any sustained involvement in the art world can tell you that abstract painting goes through some kind of revival every decade, meaning that you could have set your watch to the predictable arrival of the recent crop. But this time around, things seem a little bit different. What seems to be taking place is less a predictable revival of well-known styles (such as late 1990s “Post-Hypnotic Abstraction” or late 1960s Op Art), than a deep rethinking of the whole historical enterprise of abstract painting. This seems particularly remarkable if you have been paying close attention to the past two decades of technologically-assisted confusion about the relationship of art and entertainment because we were all beginning to assume that the possibility for such thinking had been diluted out of existence.

Pamela Jordan’s recent exhibition at Romer/Young (though October 15) represents one such instance of deep rethinking. Her work tends to be rather small, but it provides visual experiences that are very rich, complex and full of nuance. Most of her paintings are formatted as circular compositions or as almost perfect squares, offering an intimate visual experience that balances subtle fantasies of soft, fluid shapes with other more graphic forms that are circumscribed by torqued edges that are crisp and decisive. A rich palette of shadowy hues predominate in the more fluid areas of her work, which include the addition of reflective materials that add iridescence to subtle shifts of tonality. Jordan’s improbable variety of painterly treatments appears to be a *mélange* of choreographic diagrams.

Jordan’s work is also very allusive and multi-layered, and if your art-historical antennae is rusty, you might miss her many evocations of artists such as Redon, Kandinsky and Schwitters whom she casts in some very imaginative relations to the way that abstract painting evolved between the poles of Dada and Constructivism during the two decades separating the end WWI and the beginning of WW II. All of this now seems ripe for a second look, because we have routinely regarded the highly complex art history of those two decades through Alfred Barr’s and Clement Greenberg’s ideas about the “inevitable” evolution of Modernist Art. But instead of sharing those critics’ assumptions about the inevitable historical march to the promised land of visual purity, why not see the esthetic vocabularies hatched during those two decades as the early exploration of elaborate possibilities? Here is where Jordan’s work seems to have hit on something. It simultaneously reaches back to abstraction’s deep historical roots in Symbolism while also reaching forward to a world of unconventional variation on the themes of pictorial innovation for the sheer sake of exploration.

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The works of these three artists – Jordan, Brunson and Chongbin — are among a plentitude of similar efforts

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that I have noticed during the past year. Other artists whose work I would also include in my list of interesting new abstraction would include Corinne Wasmuht's stand-out contribution to this past summer's Venice Biennial, and the work of Michael Wingo, a Los Angeles painter whose recent solo exhibition at Gallery KM in Santa Monica was a welcome treat. I think that it might be interesting to note how much of the new abstraction that I am seeing harks back to the late, post-1973 works by Elmer Bischoff, Jay DeFeo and (a little bit later) Frank Lobdell, who at that time all took a decisive turn toward the abstract right when most of the painting world had started its move toward post-modernist figuration.

—MARK VAN PROYEN