

VOL 5 ISSUE 4, MARCH/APRIL 2011 FREE

KILLER TEXT ON ART

artillery

ABEX REDUX

ART IN REVOLUTION
IRAN NOW

JOHN TOTTENHAM ON **JOHN CURRIN**
GORDY GRUNDY ON **JAMES HAYWARD**
ANURAHDA VIKRAM ON **SHADOWSHOP**

GUEST
LECTURE
PHYLLIS
GREEN

ABEX RETURNS: THE SEQUEL IN LA

It's Not Just About the Paint Anymore BY DAVID DiMICHELE

IN the recent film (*Untitled*), Jonathan Parker's well-observed satire of the contemporary art world, several current directions in art are lampooned, such as Conceptualism, video art and taxidermy sculpture. However, the genre that fares the worst is abstract painting. One of the main characters, a painter whose colorful, decorative abstractions are sold in quantity to hotel chains, cannot get his dealer to consider his work serious enough to merit a show. When circumstances finally force her to hang the work in her gallery, she surveys the exhibition and weeps. Abstraction, once the height of the avant-garde, is now what a filmmaker chooses to exemplify the work of an overly commercial artist, a sell-out.

While this is certainly an unfair assessment of all current abstract painting, and many serious artists continue to carry the torch for it, there is some evidence that the genre has become problematic. Many recent shows of abstract painting do appear to be overly decorative, complacent, market-driven and derivative, especially when compared to the classic works from early in the 20th century and from the 1950s and 1960s.

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ABEX continued

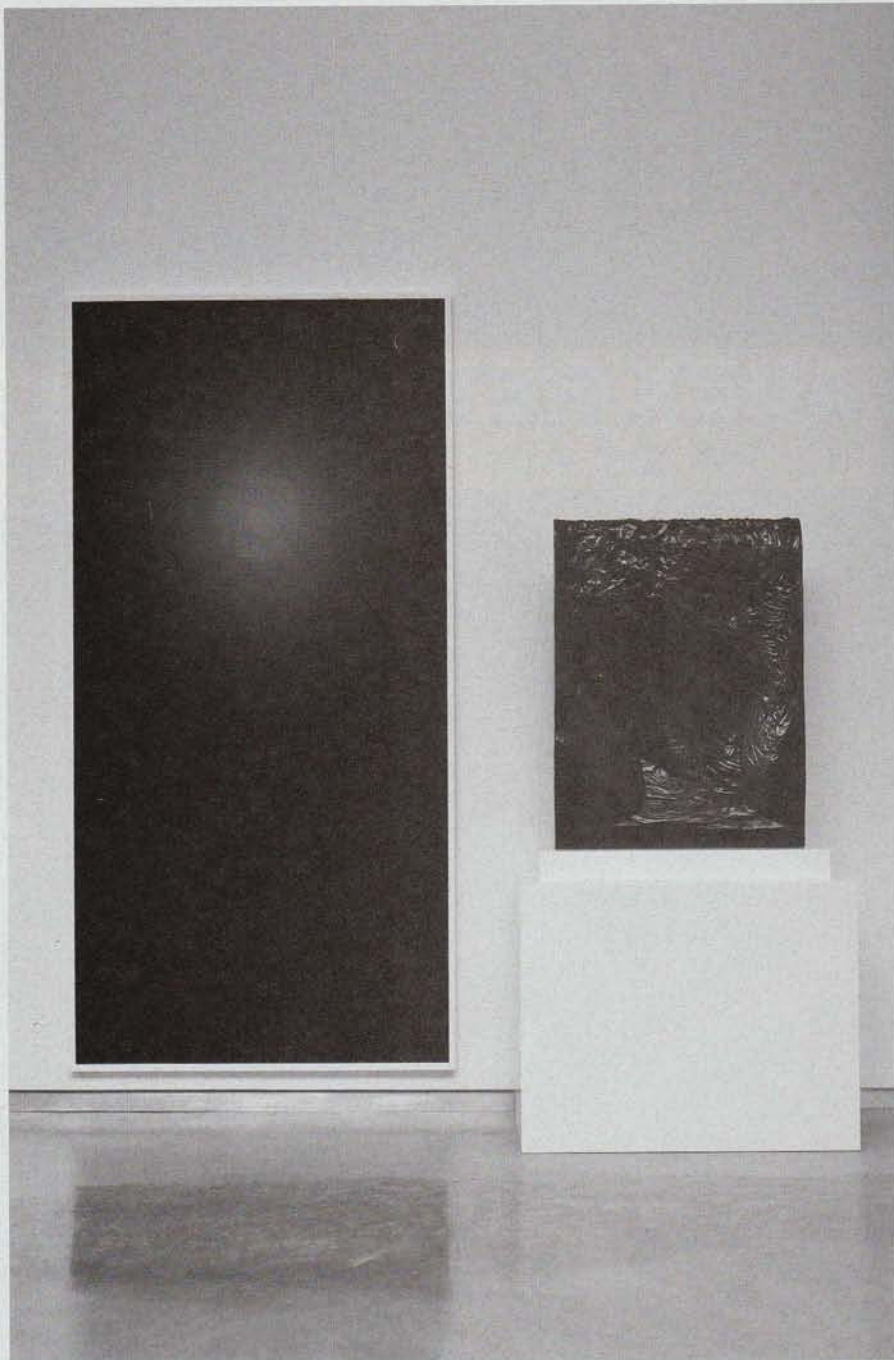
This evolution of an art form, from experimental infancy to a mannerist tradition, is typical in art history, but in the case of Abstraction it has created a difficult situation for the genre.

Abstraction has always sustained itself by continuing to develop innovative breakthroughs, something it desperately needs in order to avoid sinking into mere decoration. A solution to this dilemma was suggested by Donald Judd in his 1965 essay, "Specific Objects." Judd spoke of works that were "neither painting nor sculpture" but had aspects of both. Seen in the light of the myriad new media open to today's artists, the idea of combining media and genres has recently evinced a way for abstraction to be revitalized.

The reality is that the tradition of abstract art remains one of the noblest in the pantheon of contemporary art. A product of the early 20th century, abstraction is synonymous with the development of Modernism itself, a logical conclusion of the flattened space and emphasis upon the formal qualities of shape and color in late 19th-century Post-Impressionism and early 20th-century Expressionism. It is without a doubt one of the consummate achievements of 20th-century art, now an important part of our cultural heritage.

Abstraction has nurtured itself in the past by pushing from familiar media and genres to unfamiliar or less worked ones. Judd's own work, for example, took as its starting point the painting of Barnett Newman, translating some basic assumptions in that art into three dimensions and utilizing unusual new materials. Another instance of this phenomenon is the Post-Minimal generation of artists who came along a little later, such as Robert Smithson, Eva Hesse, Richard Serra and Barry Le Va, who influenced by Abstract Expressionist painting in general and Jackson Pollock in particular, developed a whole new approach to sculpture that emphasized the process of how the work was actually made and how it relates to the space in which it sits.

What is new and exciting in what we see in the abstract art of today has much of the same relation between painting and sculpture, but often incorporates other, newer media as well. In the past few decades we have seen more and more groundbreaking work in photography, video and installation art. Most of this work has little to do with the traditions of abstraction since, especially in the cases of photography and video, these are primarily genres based in representation. This is actually an asset to the Abstractionist, since it allows artists working in that genre the opportunity to explore relatively unworked



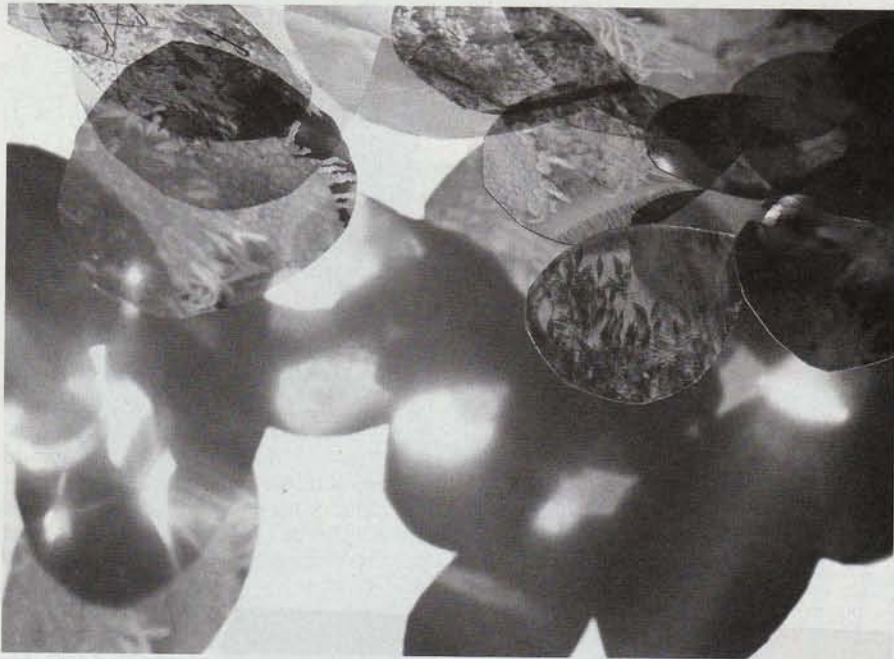
"JUDD SAID THAT HE WAS NOT CONCERNED WITH THE TRADITIONS OF SCULPTURE BECAUSE HE NEVER FELT THAT WHAT HE WAS MAKING WAS SCULPTURE."

Previous spread: Rebeca Bollinger, *Color Study*, courtesy of Walter Maciel Gallery, Los Angeles, CA 2010

Previous spread (inset): Christina Pierson, Installation Pasadena Armory Art Center, "Solar Catch," 2010

Above: Anthony Pearson, *Untitled (Flare Arrangement)*, 2010, courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

Opposite: Christina Pierson, Installation details, "Solar Catch," 2010



terrain. Again, Judd comes to mind, who said that he was not concerned with the traditions of sculpture because he never felt that what he was making was sculpture. It all depends on how you look at things; Judd, who came from a background in philosophy, art history and painting, had no prior experience in sculpture, but was in a sense at an advantage since he was unencumbered by its traditions. Innovators have the ability to think outside the box (no pun intended).

In recent months, several exhibitions in Los Angeles have embodied these ideas, with artists combining not only painting and sculpture but newer media as well in the service of Abstraction. One of the quirkiest is the work of Rebeca Bollinger, recently shown at Walter Maciel Gallery. Bollinger, who actually comes from a background in photography, has lately created some rather fresh-looking abstract art that conflates sculpture, painting, video and photography. *Color Study* (2010), a work that combines a pigment print on paper, glazed ceramic, paper and collage, has the loose feeling of an early Cubist *papier collé* work. The glazed ceramic sculptural forms sit casually on a platform in front of an out-of-focus photograph, the disparate elements somehow uniting. The effect is both 2D and 3D, like the implied space in an abstract painting come to life. Like Cubist collage, the works appear insouciant and flimsy, but are deadly serious. Bollinger also exhibited works in which video images were projected onto sculptural arrangements, a strategy that seems to offer the room to expand that abstraction currently demands.

Anthony Pearson combines sculpture and photography as well, but to completely different ends and aesthetics than Bollinger. Pearson's recent exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery showed cast bronze sculptures juxtaposed with photographic prints in combinations he calls "arrangements." It is often difficult to discern in these pieces, without looking at the titles, whether one is seeing one work — or two or three. The connection is not obvious, and is ostensibly left to the viewer, which is part of the appeal of the works. Pearson's aesthetic recalls Post-Minimal and Process artists such as Richard Serra and Robert Morris, but rather than employing slabs of rubber or rooms of thread waste, he adopts the tradition of the sculpture on a pedestal, the format that was so soundly rejected by both the Minimalist and Post-Minimalists.

In *Untitled (Flare Arrangement)* (2010), Pearson apposes a cast bronze sculpture on a pedestal with a large photograph in which the only subject is a lens flare. Lens flare, where light directly enters the lens and is scattered in the lens system, is something usually to be avoided in photography and is generally considered a technical error. Pearson uses this effect to produce hypnotically entrancing minimal images, dark fields with spots of softly diffusing light. This contrasts with the look of the sculptural component, a kind of relief sculpture on a base, irregularly shaped and possessing a richly textured surface. Together, the photograph and the sculpture create a compelling effect, balancing each other formally but with

each retaining its autonomy as an individual work. The sum of the two is greater than the parts, and the dialogue between photograph and sculpture keeps the work conceptually challenging.

The work of Megan Geckler might be more rightly described as installation art, but it too brings to mind Judd's concept of works that are neither painting nor sculpture but are related to one or the other. Created out of plastic flagging tape, Geckler's works seem more like abstract paintings in 3D space than installation, and that's one of its strengths. In a recent lecture at the Pasadena Museum of California Art, where she exhibited a new site-specific flagging tape work, "Every Move You Make, Every Step You Take," Geckler tended to credit painters, most notably Op Art pioneer Bridget Riley, as influences. Like Bollinger, Geckler invigorates her work by imaginatively switching the usually distinct categories around, in this case taking the brilliantly colored striping, normally associated with optical abstract painting, into installation art. The results are optically stunning, commingling with the architecture in the long view, and referencing geometric abstract painting (think early Ellsworth Kelly) up close.

Another artist combining newer media to produce distinctive abstract works is Christina Pierson, who creates multimedia installations as well as sculptural works. The sculptural works are created by printing imagery onto mylar and then manipulating the material to form a 3D wall sculpture, an intriguing amalgam of two and three dimensions. Recently, Pierson exhibited "Solar Catch," an installation composed of a myriad of cut mylar forms, as part of her artist residency at Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena. The work, although sculptural, has a commanding feeling of abstract painting, utilizing color, transparency, and an orientation to the wall. Other installations created with light, video projection and sculptural materials also show Pierson to be mixing media to create compelling abstract works.

Of course, mixing media in the service of optically active abstraction is not new. Los Angeles artist Jennifer Steinkamp has been creating abstract video "paintings" for many years (although judging from recent work, her imagery has turned away from Abstraction), and Oskar Fischenger, the pioneer of abstract animation who spent much of his career in Southern California, created "motion paintings" from the 1920s through the 1960s in the medium of film. Doubtlessly, if he was working today, Fischenger would be utilizing both computer imaging and video projection. His works, often presented in movie theaters, have suffered from a confusion of context because they are in reality not movies but abstract paintings that move. With

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"BY ITS VERY NATURE, AND BECAUSE IT CAN SO EASILY DEGENERATE INTO DECORATION, ABSTRACT ART NEEDS TO CONTINUE TO BREAK NEW GROUND."

today's technology, Fischenger's work could be shown in a gallery installation format, and he might be recognized for what he really was — one of the greatest and most original artists of the 20th century, comparable to Picasso and Pollock. Recently, while viewing some of his "motion paintings," I was struck by the thought that they were the most inventive and compelling abstractions I had seen in years.

None of this is meant to disparage the tradition of abstract painting and the many current painters who approach it with seriousness and rigor. Abstract painting will continue to be pursued in earnest by many artists, and is currently an active force in the art world. But we now have alternatives to painting that offer possibilities for the continued development of abstraction. The salient issue here is the viability of abstract art as a genre.

Abstraction is now almost exactly 100 years old, its origins traceable to Wassily Kandinsky's paintings of 1911–12. In the 20th century, abstract painting was worked perhaps more than any other single genre to emerge in that period. As the century advanced, it became more and more difficult for artists to sustain the experimental exuberance and sense of wonder that one experiences in the best abstract work. Simply by virtue of the fact that the newer media have been less utilized by abstractionists than painting, with its long and illustrious history, more room remains to explore possibilities. At least, that is the feeling one gets while viewing the work of the artists discussed above.

Abstraction does not have the luxury of continuing as an academic or mannerist form. By its very nature, and because it can so easily degenerate into decoration, abstract art needs to continue to break new ground. And the place this currently seems to be happening is in the work of artists who combine media, particularly recently developed ones, and whose work straddles the precarious space between painting, sculpture, photography, video and digital imagery and does not fit neatly into the conventional canons and categories. ☺

Megan Geckler,
Every Move You Make, Every Step You Take, 2010;
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