

Abstract to a Fault

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One of my routines while browsing in any second-hand bookshop is to look for more copies of a few key titles that I already own. For several years now, the English edition of Michel Seuphor's Dictionary of Abstract Painting, first printed in Paris in 1957, has been at the top of my list. Every time I've bought another one, I'm mindful of which painter friend of mine I'm going to pass it on to, knowing that it is guaranteed to provoke an invigorating conversation. Filled with thumbnail images of a predominantly European, yet impressively international selection of paintings (many of which are in what remains eye-popping full colour), this A to Z dictionary surely would have challenged even the most well-travelled curator of its time with many unfamiliar names. The book has become something of a crutch, serving me well on several occasions (such as this one) when I find myself searching for yet another way to talk about what is going on in abstract painting today. And when my subject is limited to abstract painting currently being made in Los Angeles, I still find myself wanting the book on my desk, even though there are no LA painters to be found in it whatsoever (Lee Mullican and Gordon Onslow Ford, who are included, were in San Francisco at the time).

Today, of course, certain artists embody the label of LA painter (whether or not they accept it themselves), and many attempts have been made in the past decade or so to pigeonhole the best among them, from Lari Pittman to Laura Owens. When it comes to what we think of as abstract painting, however, the label has far less of a chance to stick. This is a good thing, as the Los Angeles art scene in general seems to be comfortably adjusting to being part of a larger, fluid discourse rather than the focus of the finite attention available in the art world. Abstract painting, despite what Seuphor attempted to do almost 50 years ago, remains hard to pin down. In LA, abstract painting -- like that being made in many other places today -- takes full advantage of the reasonably unstable faultline between abstraction and representation that we know is always there, even if there have been times when we've not felt its tremors. It could even be argued that the lack of a consistent history of abstract painting -- any painting, for that matter -- in Los Angeles has encouraged a high percentage of an emerging generation to embrace it as open, if not new, territory.

One of my favourite things about Seuphor's book is the straightforward nature of its self-assured definitiveness, as well as his willingness to let us know very clearly what he thinks about the subject. Seuphor wastes no time defining an abstract painting in the opening section of an extensive and quite subjective "History of Abstract Painting" that precedes the actual dictionary: "A painting is to be called abstract when it is impossible to recognize the slightest trace of that objective reality which makes up the normal

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background of our everyday existence." It is debatable whether or not 1957 was the last time anyone would be able to claim such a thing so forcefully. However, what is clear is the extent to which abstract painting in general has opened itself up to "our everyday existence" since that time. (To my mind, Mary Heilmann has been the source of this shift in perspective: as a New York painter who was born in San Francisco and grew up in Los Angeles, she has had a major impact on artists in LA since Laura Owens and Monique Prieto, the two painters that she most directly influenced when she was a visiting artist at CalArts in the early 1990s.)

The Los Angeles abstract painters I have brought together here bring the everyday to abstraction; not to 'tame' it or otherwise encapsulate it within what is now a very elastic definition of representation, but rather to open it up to a vernacular that can stay comfortably and productively within painting and abstraction without provoking a separation or a sense of exclusion. All of them make a version of abstract painting that is about making connections, whether figuratively (pun intended) or materially. For me, these painters are related to each other, but I would caution against interpreting their selection as particularly representative of any kind of trend or tendency. In the end, they are the abstract painters in LA that are on my mind at the moment, due mostly to recent solo exhibitions -- including a breathtaking show of Karl Benjamin, whose paintings from the 1950s and 1960s seem to thrive right now alongside work made by artists who weren't even born when they were made. (Benjamin should have been in Seuphor's dictionary.)

In addition to recent shows in LA and elsewhere, Lecia Dole-Recio and Kim Fisher have work in the current Whitney Biennial. Along with Stan Kaplan, all three studied with Richard Hawkins while in graduate school in LA (Dole-Recio and Kaplan at Art Center, Fisher at Otis). And while Benjamin seems to re-enter the discourse from another era, it should be noted that he taught at the Claremont Graduate School from 1979 to 1994. It is no secret that the art schools play a major role in the scene; it is also true that abstract painting has been shaped significantly in the 'academy' by artists like Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe (currently Chair of the MFA programme at Art Center) and James Hayward (who recently curated an eclectic exhibition called "The Next Wave: New Abstract Painting in Los Angeles" at Black Dragon Society in Chinatown, featuring 10 young painters, including Kaplan).

Both Lecia Dole-Recio and Kim Fisher make it clear in their work that they are particularly interested in investigating the material support of painting as it attends to abstraction, simultaneously challenging and reinforcing the physical nature of the painting as an object and/or a surface. In the case of Dole-Recio's works (all of which are untitled), their status as paintings is complicated not only by the range of materials from which they are made (various types of papers, cardboard, tape, glue and even paints), but also by the extreme extent to which they are cut into and reassembled. Her procedure is to tape together several layers of supporting materials that she then draws and paints over. Numerous geometric shapes cut out of the layers are then resized or

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replaced in 'windows' of clear tape, allowing actual transparency in the work. This culminates in the creation of a resolutely hybrid situation that invokes everything from the architectural and the systemic, to the visionary (and due for another look) mid-century paintings of Maria Elena Vieira da Silva. Seuphor's entry on da Silva's work is point with Dole-Recio's: "Something is there that was never expressed before: a space without dimensions, both limited and boundless, a hallucinating mosaic where each element is endowed with an inner power transcending its own matrix."

In her most recent work, Kim Fisher likewise has taken to disrupting the seamless nature of the stretched canvas as an exclusionary site of abstraction. The sophisticated humour of this jostling (expressed most emphatically in the fringe of unstretched canvas that she has been exposing around the perimeter of some of her paintings) does not detract from the rigour of her enterprise and its overall commitment to a formal presentation of what can only be called the beautiful. By reconciling the trappings of fashion and luxury with the conventions of monochrome painting in her work (wherein the cut of a gemstone in a ring or watch could inspire both the painted and the physical 'cut' of a painting), Fisher has excavated some fresh territory for her tightly controlled output. Titles like Beryl15 (2003), Labradorite31 and Tourmaline33 (both 2003-04) transpose the classification system of precious stones into the vocabulary of painting, a language that is ultimately reinforced by the tremendous range of painting techniques that she manages to pursue and distribute within deliberately limited parameters. In several works, triangular pieces of razor-sharp paint have been placed on the canvas almost as if they were pieces of jewellery or a fragment of a garment -- an association that would have been more than taboo during another time, yet today seems more than appropriate given the significant interaction between fashion and art.

At first glance, the paintings of Stan Kaplan appear to be far more conventional than those of Dole-Recio and Fisher. However, he shares with his two peers an interest in the vernacular aspects of his practice: or as it was stated in the press release accompanying his first solo exhibition at Mary Goldman Gallery at the end of 2003, "Kaplan ... acknowledges the way existential forces of light and smog specific to Los Angeles affect the atmosphere permeated by the painting ... The state of mind created by weather and the navigation of urban sprawl are critical elements underlying the artist's visual language." In his canvases (also all untitled), Kaplan sets up webs of shallow space that unfold over time into complex situations both pictorially and materially. (It is interesting to consider here his earlier experience prior to graduate school, when he was living in New York and working as a studio assistant to the realist painter Philip Pearlstein.) Ribbons of what come across as other dimensions often seem to slice across his canvases in a manner similar to the literal cutting away found in Dole-Recio's work: like fog (or smog), these blurred areas almost take light differently, dividing the overall appearance of the painting in a manner reminiscent of the kind of splitting images one can see while experiencing migraine or the effects of mind-altering substances.

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Judging from conversations I've had, many of us who have been fans of Richard Hawkins's work since the 1980s were blown away when he suddenly started painting a few years ago. Having achieved a significant level of attention for an extensive body of work often made from the gay-male-identified pages of fashion and pornographic magazines, it was quite a surprise not so much that he began making paintings, but rather that at the outset they were all abstract. In a recent catalogue of his work, he was asked by Larry Johnson (a photo-based, yet painting-friendly, artist who himself is an important and under-recognized influence in this town) about his move from figuration to abstraction. His response is appropriately convoluted: "At some point, given the fact that I'd alternately packed either or both the figure and the formal into the work but that the figure (representation) was always the stagehog, I thought to dismantle that by experimenting with simple non-allegorical, non-referential, non-representational formalism."

Starting in 2000 with paintings like mostly red & orange, small canvases filled with brushy rectangles of colour layered on top of each other, each with the requisite drips all running at the same angles, Hawkins quickly diversified his repertoire. Willing to take on everyone from Picabia (*The Drunken Sailor*, 2003) to Peter Saul (*Understructure of a plane: Peter Saul colors*, 2003) in paintings that flirt with the anonymity of geometry alongside simple representational elements like table-tops or liquor bottles, Hawkins has already reintroduced a kind of 'hillbilly' figuration back into his practice. According to him, they are the result of a kind of painter's block, a way to keep going.

That need to keep going is a big part of the reason why Karl Benjamin's paintings from the 1950s and 1960s, recently shown at Louis Stern Fine Arts, demand to be included in this particular survey of where things stand. His willingness to straddle the abstract (*Interlocking Forms [violet/burnt umber]*, 1958) and the figurative (*Chino, Hills*, 1957) within the idiosyncratic, even signature, geometry of his work allows his paintings to participate in the open discourse of contemporary abstract painting. Even his words about his work from over 40 years ago fit into the way in which we see things today: "Each shape or form is almost a part of a great sheet with only this little part showing to let you know that the whole exists." Peter Frank described Benjamin's work best in his LA Weekly review: "Bright, hot, unalloyed colours that broil with California sun, a bebop spirit brimming with cubist rhythms, and a willingness to negotiate the visual space between exterior and interior topographies (ie, between mountain-tops and table-tops) all enliven Benjamin's painting almost beyond coherence." In other words, truly abstract to a fault.

ADDED MATERIAL

Karl Benjamin, *Chino Hills*, 1957, oil on canvas, 55.9 °— 86.4cm © THE ARTIST, COURTESY LOUIS STERN FINE ARTS, WEST HOLLYWOOD. Lecia Dole- Recio, *Untitled*, 2003, paper, vellum, tape, paint, 177.8 °— 167.6cm COURTESY RICHARD TELLES FINE ART, LOS ANGELES. Kim Fisher, *Beryl 15*, 2003, oil on linen, 63.5 °— 63.5cm COURTESY CHINA ART OBJECTS GALLERIES, LOS ANGELES Stan Kaplan, *Untitled (Red Formation)*, 2003, oil on canvas, 193 °— 213cm COURTESY MARY GOLDMAN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES