

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

The New York Times
August 2010

Varieties of Abstraction



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times
An installation view of Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery, with paintings by Wayne Gonzales, left, and Mel Bochner

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Published: August 5, 2010

Happy birthday, abstract painting! One of the prides and joys of Western modernism is in the vicinity of its first centennial. It's hard to be much more exact, since its invention was a scattered effort extending over years if not decades. Fans of Frantisek Kupka should have celebrated last year; Kandinsky's crowd can uncork the Champagne in 2012. Devotees of Mondrian or Malevich will have to wait a year or two longer.

Of course one can make too much of this anniversary. Beyond the narrow precincts of Western painting and sculpture, abstraction has been a free radical in visual culture for a lot longer than a century, a vital component in ceramics and textiles worldwide, for example, since time immemorial, or in Chinese painting for most of a millennium. Still, within a global history of abstraction, the Western variety has its own substantial chapter, one that is still being written.

Since its inception, abstract painting in the West has given as good as it has gotten. It has spawned styles, schools and opposing camps, not to mention

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volumes of criticism. It has repeatedly cross-fertilized with representational painting; absorbed found materials and aspects of popular culture; adopted the strategies of postmodern irony and appropriation.

In addition the principles of abstraction have spread to photography and sculpture and beyond — even to the mind-set behind Conceptual Art, with its penchant for systems, categories and repetition that isolate and reorganize, and thereby abstract, aspects of reality. It is worth remembering, when considering the ever-expanding definition of abstract art, that the term refers to the act of abstracting from reality. For whatever reason, such art — in paint and other mediums — is unusually visible in Manhattan galleries this summer. The shows in question don't always set out to focus on abstraction per se, but that doesn't stop them from providing a lively account of some of its movements.

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Lisa Cooley Fine Art

At Lisa Cooley (34 Orchard Street, Lower East Side), the equally exceptional “No Barrier Fun” lives up to its nearly nonsensical title (borrowed from a new song by Liars, the ostentatiously dour post-punk band). The show's one photograph — an especially blurry body-print earthwork by Ana Mendieta — provides an uncanny link to the Abreu show (right next door). But otherwise much serious play transpires in mostly abstract paintings, and at every turn we encounter the freedoms (fun) of ignoring or accentuating edges and boundaries (barriers) of all kinds, whether literal, stylistic, bodily or psychic.

Ballast is provided by two older artists: Jo Baer, who reconfigures her signature two-toned Minimalist borders as quasi-legible letters, and Dan Walsh, who is represented by a field of concentric green lines that effectively mines the terrain of Frank Stella's Black Paintings. But most of the work is by refreshingly unfamiliar names.

Using grout, Molly Zuckerman Hartung gives a small green abstract canvas a protective border of tiny stones and bits of glass to poetic effect. Heather Guertin surgically separates stretcher, frame, canvas and image into three separate occasions for painting. Francesca Fuchs makes small, wonderfully wan renditions of even smaller snapshots and drawings, including mats, frames and those frames' shadows, that seem to be fading into the mist, toward abstraction.

In Scott Calhoun's “Emperor Gum,” an enormous pale bubble jostles the canvas's edges while ambiguous shapes and forms percolate within its translucent, skinlike expanse. Michael Bauer adds tilelike black-and-white borders to a painterly tangle that evokes the liquidity of Wols and the precision of early Dalí. And Alex Olson's “Weaver” echoes much of all this

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with admirably relaxed simplicity: thicker white over thinner black on white, finished with some languid scratched lines, looping back and forth.

The show's finishing touch is a continuing work by Peter Coffin in which members of the gallery staff draw circles in colored chalk on the floor around visitors, recording a linear afterimage.

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