

Staging Abstraction
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Today is a transition from yesterday. In the great pit of forms lie broken fragments to some of which we still cling. They provide abstraction with its material. A junkyard of unauthentic elements for the creation of impure crystals. That is how we have it today.
Paul Klee, 1915¹

My art education was really an indoctrination of sorts into a culture of post-medium conceptualism. One that pushed outmoded discipline-specific traditions like painting aside for forms of art making less burdened by history at the time such as performance, video, installation and photography. If some painting was being talked about it certainly wasn't the kind that utopian visionaries like Kazimir Malevich or theosophical spiritualists like Hilma af Klint innovated in late 19th and early 20th century Europe. It certainly wasn't the kind of medium-specific formalism of the post-WWII period as in the work of Americans Franz Kline, Barnett Newman and Willem de Kooning. Painting in the year 2000 was happening, of course, but it seemed eclectic, hybridized, reflexive to the point of neurosis, and able to absorb its own critiques in ways that allowed it to be exhibited alongside other media and post-media practices in curatorial projects exploring broad themes like identity, institutional critique, post-colonialism and so on. For me this post-modern reality cultivated an artistic identity of *artist-as-painter*. Another way of explaining it might be to say that I came to understand appropriation but not authenticity; conceptualism but not colour; size, but not scale; signifiers but not composition; conceptual gestures but not gestural painting. Painting at this time meant internalizing the critique of historical abstract painting – its inability to address the social, economic and political upheavals of the latter half of the 20th century along with its fall from atop an old-fashioned hierarchy of disciplines and styles.

¹ Paul Klee, Diary Entry no. 951, 1915, F. Klee, ed., *The Diaries of Paul Klee*, London, 1964, p. 313

In the mid-1960s abstract painting had become a target for many who saw it as an artistic cul-de-sac – myopic experimentation promoted by a small group of artists who came to stand for a brand of formalism founded on the virtues of art for art's sake. The Museum of Modern Art in New York, led by its first director Alfred Barr was the treasury for paintings made by these artists while key figures like critic and curator Clement Greenberg supplied the arguments that shaped the story of an advancing Modernist vision. Greenberg declared that Modern art was really the purification of form through successive movements and styles. "The task of self-criticism," he argued, "became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thereby each art would be rendered 'pure,' and in its purity find the guarantee of its standards of quality [...]"² For painting this required confronting the essential properties of the medium: flat surfaces, the shape of supports, and the properties of pigments such as its viscosity, body, luminosity, transparency, and colour. Where the Old Masters had regarded these properties as limitations to be overcome, Modernist painters used these very limitations to define the essential characteristics of their medium, thereby turning the *métier* of painting into the task of self-criticism.³ Yet, the 1960's seemed to bring about an end to the inwardness and solipsism of Modern art and its synecdoche, abstract painting. Arthur Danto went as far as to label this period the "end of art."⁴ Not the end altogether, of course, but the cessation of a single-minded modernist narrative of progress. Abstraction founded on occult spiritualism, utopian visions and formalist elitism suddenly seemed less relevant to a world coming to grips with the challenges of civil liberty, equality, ecological disaster and war.

² Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Art & Literature* 4 (Spring 1965): 194.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Arthur Danto, "Introduction: Modern, Postmodern, Contemporary," in *After the End of Art*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 2.

Staging Abstraction: Paintings from the Collection spans the 1960s to the 1980s. A tumultuous period marked by the end of heroic Modernist painting and the dawning of post-modernism, which in part sought to dismantle the myths of modernism. And yet, abstraction continues in the 1970s, 80s, and indeed today as well. What is so striking about these abstract works seen together is the sheer variety of responses to the 'end of art.' Some artists turned their attention to the world beyond self-critical painting, reintroduced the figure and the icon, and in so doing, renewed an age-old partnership with representation. Others mined technical innovations and new industrial and commercial products to reinvigorate the mode of abstract painting. And, while abstract painting was no longer the 'advanced' art, it was still a viable tributary of production for many artists well in to the 1980s. Abstract painting became one option among many others in plural fields of styles, media and disciplines in a post-modern world.

By 1965 Richard Gorman had abandoned painting for film, new media and happenings.⁵ His muscular and direct abstract painting *Jacks* from 1961 is an example of his strident and confident style before a 14-year hiatus and a triumphal return to abstraction in 1979.⁶ *Jacks* is an impressive painting. Measuring a little over a meter in both directions, the picture has great scale, impacting the viewer by drawing in and engulfing vision with dramatic brushwork and dynamic painterly movement. The dominant hues are muted and discrete; mostly subdued blues, greens and greys punctuated by magenta tendrils. Using the brush almost as a spatula, Gorman spreads the tonal hues around the center of the composition, charging the pictorial space with energetic movement while avoiding the kind of mud a less skilled painter would surely churn up. Gorman's painting is unencumbered by self-doubt or any kind of anxiety of influence. Despite being a somewhat late gestural abstraction, *Jacks* exudes expression and seems deeply committed to provoking its viewer to feel something genuine.

⁵ Roald Nasgaard, *Abstract Painting in Canada* (Vancouver: Douglas McIntyre Ltd., 2007), 239.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Other artists in the exhibition mine the remnants of forms left behind by abstraction's productive past – not looking to innovate, but to repurpose and appropriate. Coming from outside the discipline of painting, sculptor and photographer Barbara Astman hints at a lofty spiritualism with platonic geometry while constructing her works with highly discursive pre-fabricated linoleum and found plastic laminate. *Stepping Past Some Obscure Obstacles* from 1984 is made almost entirely from decorative laminate pre-inscribed with illusionistic simulations of coloured marble, granite and even textile imprints. Here found representation and form are conduits to a metaphorical enlightenment. In her catalogue essay for the artist's twenty-year survey exhibition *Personal/Persona* from 1995, Liz Wylie writes that Astman, "...ruminat[e] about our associations with stairs, both in popular culture and as an archetype, at a subconscious level. Climbing stairs can indicate a move to a higher realm, either of consciousness or experience; and descending can represent a movement into the subconscious."⁷

The dictates of conceptualism and minimalism – or as Frank Stella put it in 1964, "what you see is what you see" – led painters further away from the tradition of representation; some abstractionists even leaving behind the classical problems of abstract painting such as colour, line, form and composition. Instead, new horizons of process and procedure demonstrated a way beyond expressionism and the mastery of materials, technique and craft. Don Jean-Louis' silver and black wall work with sculptural component, *Topographers Antediluvian Dream and Link* from 1985, acknowledges its earthly and alchemical matter in a laundry list of materials: latex paint, dust, urethane, silver paint, aluminum powders, water-based bonding glues, and rock. Reluctant to call his canvas works paintings, Jean-Louis only partly coordinates the deployment of silvery-black miasma across the allover surface. While the larger composition is determined by the artist's intentional pouring of liquid paint, the subtle punctuations of light and darkness

⁷ Liz Wylie, *Personal/Persona* (Hamilton: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1995), 42.

throughout the rhythmic churning of black and silver is governed mostly by chance and the laws of physics.⁸

Since the late 1960s Joseph Drapell has tirelessly worked at the project of Modernist painting. The artist continues to demonstrate that Post-Painterly Abstraction is ongoing and reminds us that there are artists for whom abstraction was never interrupted by a period of ironic detachment or outright rejection. While 'serious' abstract painting has undoubtedly experienced a return to popularity over the past decade or so, painters like Drapell reveal that most of us are just catching up.

Drapell's technical innovation was his use of gigantic trowel-like tools, which, when drawn through liquid colours, mediate mannerism and merge colour field with gestural painting on a massive scale. Since the 1970s, many of these paintings have been made in what appears to be a single 360 degree rotation of the tool – nearly as large or larger than the canvas itself. In *Nation*, from 1976, Drapell roughly anchors one end of the tool at the center origin of the painting while the other end is manipulated around the perimeter, creating a single rotational gesture. The result is a luminous blue lens interrupted by vivid crimson gashes, complex black chasms and phosphorescent green trails. While it might be tempting to describe Drapell's technique as anti-subjective or dispassionate, careful observation of this painting reveals slight hiccups caused by undulations and swerves in the path of the tool as it correlates to inconsistencies of the canvas weave *and* to the changes in pressure, erratic breathing or physical limitations of the artist's body as he reaches to circumnavigate the entirety of the painting field. It is in these perturbations that the self-reflexive tradition of Modernist painting meets Drapell's unique brand of reductive baroque expressionism.

All painting is abstract, high realism included, since representational painting necessarily requires the flattening of three-dimensional space into two-dimensional illusion and spreading it across a flat surface. If you accept

⁸ Ihor Holubizky to Acquisitions Committee, Art Gallery of Hamilton Library and Archives, Hamilton.

this notion, then abstraction must be seen as a viable, and perhaps even necessary, feature of painting's essential character – even if we don't accept that it is the inevitable conclusion for all painting, as the Modernists believed. In my own art practice, abstraction often appears where the fact of painting's materiality pronounces itself over the fiction of representation. While you might sense a landscape in one of my compositions, your vision is never free to float easily into the illusion of an endless horizon – a smear of paint, a glint of actual reflected light, or a hard and obdurate surface will always bring you back to the here and now, to abstraction's fact and representation's fiction, both.

These vicissitudes of illusion and materiality are common features of the viewing experience of many of the paintings in this exhibition. In his somber, hard edge painting *BGBs* from 1984, Yves Gaucher gives his hues similar values, causing the eye to slide across the fast, hard, diagonal bands of the shallow picture while the hard edges of shapes and an unrelenting evenness of acrylic paint applied by a roller push the experience in front of the canvas instead of beyond. Roald Nasgaard perfectly describes the experience of this type of Gaucher when he says, "the visual activity would occur then, not in some space inside the painting, but in front of it, in an animated space that simultaneously embraces the painting and the viewer who sets it in motion."⁹ The theatrical play of optical activity in front of the painting directly contrasts the absorptive tradition of Gaucher's abstract forbearers like Barnett Newman or Jules Olitski.

David Diao also maintains a taught pressure on the viewer by straining our desire to penetrate the pictorial composition across a congealed surface of viscous Aquatec paint hurled by the artist and drawn down by gravity over a flat surface. Diao's *Pick Up* from 1972 performs a soliloquy of Post-Painterly Abstraction, inviting the viewer to consider how his vibrant, acrid turquoise and pink painting synthesizes the story of Modernist abstraction while pointing to its undoing; heaving the thick, gooey paint across

⁹ Roald Nasgaard, "Yves Gaucher: Life and Work," Art Canada Institute: accessed March 2, 2016, <http://www.aci-iac.ca/yves-gaucher/technique-and-style>

the surface in a melodramatic staging of gestural abstraction and colour field painting, Diao's technique shifts incident from the intentionality of artistic expression to the material properties of paint and support.

It used to be that abstraction moved forward when artists made propositions, provoking others to develop alternative positions, counter-manifestos and paintings that argued with each other in public duels of one-upmanship. Today the eclectic, polyvocal and decentralized activity that makes up contemporary art can't provide the kind of dogma needed in order to foster anything like a movement, let alone a counter-culture. Artists today draw their own networks across great expanses of history, of art and non-art, of Euro-American and non-Western traditions, of fine art and craft, of kitsch and avant-garde. Abstract painters today might still be having arguments, but more often than not they're arguing with the dead.

The unique and eclectic voices from the collection of the Art Gallery of Hamilton show us that the grand arguments that once sustained the abstract mode exploded into a paroxysm of styles and agendas after the early 1960s. Danto described this new paradigm, this absence of direction, as "the defining trait of the new period."¹⁰ While, for many artists, abstraction may have lost its single-minded historical narrative, what it gained was renewed vitality, evidenced in this exhibition by the hybridization of media and styles witnessed in Barbara Astman, Erik Gamble and Don Jean-Louis; the dialectical richness gained from the contradictory, even conflicting, comingling of abstraction and representation in Tim Zuck, Jack Bush and Joyce Wieland; and an entire cosmos of alternative, individual and idiosyncratic approaches to abstraction as evidenced by Harold Feist, Joseph Drapell, K.M. Graham and others. What these artists show us is a way beyond the impasse at the 'end of art'. It can be found in highly idiosyncratic painting practices where the terms of engagement are no longer set by a singular discourse but by diverse practitioners working across vastly different conversations and networks; practices that abandon the quest for novelty and the myth of

¹⁰ Danto, *Modern, Postmodern, Contemporary*, 7.

originality in favour of something familiar – something found. These paintings convince us that abstraction has been there all along, waiting to be uncovered from the junkyard of forms – to be performed, to be staged.