



3 PARAGRAPHS TO MYSELF*

Abstract painting today carries the burden of an enormous problem. First, because the meaning of painting has been as influential as it has been longstanding. The acceptance of formalist cant by artist/acolytes and numerous “academies” set off a chain reaction – that of abstraction depleting itself well before the onset of critical theory. The second aspect of the problematic emerges out of the critique of painting, which accepted formalism as painting’s identity and then raised issues of authorship, subjectivity, and originality as well as those of race, gender, and class. The problem of painting comes from within and out. So then how do you paint while recognizing that painting is an interesting yet inadequate language, flawed by hyperbole and visual bombast while also acknowledging the often valid claims of its critics?

Paradoxically, for me the answer lies in the very inadequacy of abstraction. By nature, abstraction lacks direct material references (whether the aesthetic distance of painting itself, or that it is not photo-based, nor an artifact or by-product of popular culture, or simply its general disinterestedness in non-formal matters), abstraction remains wanting. But this does not mean that painting cannot address matters of everyday culture. Nor do I think it has to. But it could. Painting

* 1991, unpublished.

is a constructed language and not a natural thing like a tree. This “inadequacy” interests me – what this dominant visual language left out as it promoted desires for purity, universality, beauty, and transcendence; the intangibles. That is not to say that that is ALL abstraction has been concerned with, but it occurred to me some time ago that I didn’t understand what those words meant. I do understand what these concepts are supposed to signify, what it is supposed to be addressing to me, in the interchangeable roles of viewer and maker. But that doesn’t mean I have to accept this supposed meaning.

There is no reason NOT to paint because painting represents a closed code. The problem lies in the persistent controls that abstraction has exerted upon itself. Dominant ideologies exist in painting as in almost everything that comes to our attention. That this ideology has been subjective, male, white, privileged, etc. is undeniable; that the principles of Modernism, if there are any anyone can agree on, are no longer functional is evident. However, consideration of the history of abstract painting is crucial to undertake a self-critique alongside the culture that created it, and perhaps find new meanings in the course of that exploration. I don’t, of course, mean to offer a new prescription that is necessarily “critical” as opposed to one that isn’t; I am just discussing the things that interest me, and they are things, not strategies. The very restriction of the past allows a space in which to meander around. And, painting’s further remove from a central position, where it no longer is a major player, permits an interesting distance from the crowded field of oppositional art.

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Trump attacks Feinstein



WHITE LINES*

...I'd rather look at a rock than a painting..

—Laura Cottingham

In the decade of the Eighties, the unsuitability of the easel painting to women, people of color, to artists of other cultures, races and sexual identity than the White European Male to whom painting is suited has been a nagging theme by those who see in alternative avenues of expression—performance, video installation, site-specific work—pathways to the artistic enfranchisement of the dispossessed... On the other hand, the widening of artistic possibilities under pressure from politics has in fact immensely widened the artistic options even of White European Male.

—Arthur Danto, "Post-Historical Abstract Painting,"
in *Tema Celeste*, Autumn 1991, pp.54-55

How nice that politics, particularly feminism, should have provided WEMs with wider artistic options.

I am not interested in the question of abstraction sustaining itself. The difficulty is there, like a rock in the road. Abstraction's erosion, as a player, has run the course of a generation as feminism, revisionist art history and criticism contributed to our current state, so far, of multivalent, multicultural practice and theory. But artists do not shop for languages. They avail themselves of opportunities from a complexly textured web of social, psychological, cultural and visual experiences.

A catalog of "styles" (Modernism's jargon, not mine) has

* 1992, unpublished.

emerged not dissimilar from the markers that once signified alienation, transcendence, universality, etc. Now, we see alternatives in mediums and materials such as the ones that Danto cites, employed by women with particular success. In Danto's terms women who paint – those visible, at any rate – could make pictures that critique formalism (and not-so-formalism), address sexual abuse, the body, gender stereotypes and the marginalization of women by powerful social forces. People of other sexual identities often explore themes of death or love. People of color have more options because they may fit into the two former groups, or be straight men, and so can occupy positions *vis-à-vis* gender, sexual identity and race. If we follow Danto's logic, African-American males have the widest options in art culture.

That painting thinks it has reacted to the pressures of a very impure (and appallingly embarrassing) past and a politicized present is evidenced by its colonization of the galleries last year. A common feature of this abstraction is an exchange of Modernism's former "momentum" for a more self-consciously skeptical position regarding its limits. Does this represent a change of practice? Is there a position between a rock and a hard place? Much of the work is occasioned by re-configurations of formalist codes. Is Greenberg's model of advanced painting being exemplified or repudiated? The history-as-utility mode operates as both an insistence *on* abstraction as well as a critique *of* it. Whether "pure" process, end-game painting, objectness-of-the-painted-object, the flat affect of the sign, or a Benjaminian anti-auratic discourse, these modes seem to be arising not from the pressure of politics

but from within the condition of painting, a *style* situation born the instant painting began signifying.

Women artists have been aggressive in their practice from inside and outside the discipline of painting in shaping representations of subjects beyond the historically constructed categories of traditional art. They have, for instance, created ingenious forms of expression offering immediate access to their issues, using ordinary, mass-produced materials. In doing this many assert it as a choice not to engage, transgress against, or compete with the historical authority of abstraction. Men have found it all too easy to maintain their ever "widened artistic options." As for women who continue to paint, they are treated as if they had penises (unless they paint them) – but without the privileges in either case. An extra burden of blame is served to these women: why are you doing men's work?

Thus women abstract painters are made to appear, anthropologically speaking, as Structural Males. But that the codes in painting have been exhausted is perhaps what makes these codes so interesting and vital, *because* and not in spite of painting's history of phallogentrism, racism, Eurocentrism and class privilege. These are vivid grammars and conventions to be recognized, used to re-possess abstract painting and demystify its voice. It's very simple and that clear: to change painting by looking at its historically inscribed meaning, and invert, skewer, reinvent, and even laugh at its conceit would be a most pleasurable subversion of the text, a way to *break rocks* with the gendered roles that we assume bind us.

MAKING PAINTINGS*

Saul has asked us to respond to a number of questions about painting: about abstraction and representation, aesthetics, intuition, tradition, and the role of the viewer. Some of these issues interest me more than others because I am more practically involved in them. To frame them I'd like to use a movie story as a way to talk about my interest in impurity, or dirt, as a metaphor within the context of hardcore abstraction.

In 1937, Samuel Goldwyn, known as the producer of "quality" movies, was making a picture about urban life, aptly called *Dead End*. The set was designed to recreate a slice of the modern city where slum and apartment building were slammed against one another. To make a realist movie, real garbage and litter were strewn over the set. Each morning, when Goldwyn came on set he removed the debris. When William Wyler complained that the picture needed the dirt to be convincing, Goldwyn said "There won't be any dirty/slums - not in my picture." The irony, of course, is that you can't have a city without dirt.

Can you have a painting without impurity? It seems that painting comes with its own contaminants, whether they are detectable or not. The Goldwyn story appeals to me as a juicy text, not just about an emigrant who had a compulsion for cleaning, and helped to shape collective utopian will, but

also for the act of negation as deployed upon representation. Goldwyn's housecleaning displays a desire to make the visual thing controlled and repeatable. The motivation in painting for most of the 20th Century has gone the opposite direction, that of making a non-repeatable, resistant, unique image through a pattern of constant stylistic innovation and refinement of form. But the evidence found in current painting practice reflects a break away from its former linearity, concern with style, and detachment, as well as with the greatly diminished barriers between abstraction and representation.

I use dirt metaphorically to describe those extra aesthetic qualities that enter painting from the outside and apply constant pressure to it. Abstraction is understood as a signifying practice, constructed by marks, colors, surfaces of certain sizes, and of varied densities that have accrued historical significance during the last seventy years. Those meanings have been expanded and scrutinized by aestheticians, social historians, as well as, in the last decade, by critical and feminist theorists who have raised the question of painting as either an ideological construct or as the end-of-an-ideology (or both). And then there is the ambition by artists to infuse abstraction with subject matter that is about painting or the impossibility of it; or work that introduces different material practices to discuss difference.

As an abstract painter, the pollutants are what interest me as they are set within, or against, the context of modernist language; in a way, Goldwyn's language. Dirtiness is a kind of grammar that puts language to use; that embraces subjects

that are discarded and disavowed, that are alternately banal or valued, interesting or stupid, personal or public, beautiful or ugly, aesthetic or functional. The legacy of the grid, as perhaps the most principled and achieved form in the language of abstraction, has absorbed so much of my attention because in and of itself it's already a representation that comes with a meaning, as a ready-made would be, and can be understood as such by a viewer. The same can be said by now for every category of abstraction. The advantage of painting in this moment is that we can intervene with a past of accrued meanings to alter – not only join or tack onto – the vocabulary of the visual.

Frederic Jameson said that said that the visual is essentially pornographic: "pornographic films ask us to stare at the world as if it were a naked body." My notion of *hardcore* abstraction is used in this spirit; the Exquisite Corpse *is* history. As to Saul's questions – on faith – this seems to be based on a belief in the invisible, and I am interested in mechanics, so concept has no relevance for me. On intuition: yes. Paint as a collaborative medium has "intuition" and I depend on it's imperfection and capriciousness. On intuition: yes, paint as a collaborative medium entails *intuition* and I depend on its imperfection and capriciousness. On the viewer: I think of a viewer/reader to whom I can (hopefully) provide enough activity so he/she can swoon and cognate at the same time.