



“Besides, With, Against, and Yet”

THE KITCHEN

This past winter, 'twas the season of nonfigurative painting in New York, what with specters of abstraction past (Wassily Kandinsky at the Guggenheim, Georgia O’Keeffe at the Whitney) and harbingers of things to come (for instance, Bob Nickas’s “Cave Painting II” at Gresham’s Ghost). Even so, the Kitchen’s “Besides, With, Against, and Yet: Abstraction and the Ready-Made Gesture,” curated by the institution’s director, Debra Singer, staked out important ground. Exemplifying a set of practical-*cum*-theoretical tendencies—the two are now inextricably linked, which is part of the story—without forcing them into an infelicitous ism, Singer incisively grouped twenty-two New York-based artists whose works, per the press release, exhibit “diverging conceptual approaches to abstract painting and question the fundamental roots of the medium’s modernist legacies.” Thus did

Richard Aldrich, Polly Apfelbaum, Kerstin Brätsch, Ana Cardoso, Jessica Dickinson, Cheryl Donegan, Keltie Ferris, Wade Guyton, Jaya Howey, Alex Hubbard, Jacqueline Humphries, Jacob Kassay, Jutta Koether, Nate Lowman, Seth Price, R. H. Quaytman, Blake Rayne, Davis Rhodes, Cheyney Thompson, Patricia Treib, Charline von Heyl, and Kelley Walker offer a referential smorgasbord (think Pop, Conceptual, Minimalist, and process, chiefly) coeval with, and attendant upon, an archive of gestures more than of pictures.

Indeed, Singer’s proposition seemed to be one of keen engagement with a painterly modernism that is, somewhat literally, together made and found—or, better, made in the finding as much as found in the making. In this way, while harking back to Marcel Duchamp, “Besides” also articulated an argument for the readymade in and as abstract painting. And while precursors such as Robert Rauschenberg’s campy, nonobjective brushstrokes in *Factum I* and *Factum II*, both 1957, or Sherrie Levine’s more temporally proximate, generically modernist grids (the clear antecedent here) permit an extended history of such appropriations, critic Thierry de Duve has argued for a structural involution that obviates distinctions between painting and the readymade since, as Duchamp said, the tube of paint is itself a readymade. But if Duchamp registered a connection to painting by actively abandoning it—turning to the readymade as against paint on canvas—the artists in the Kitchen’s exhibition register a more ambivalent position. These works are uniformly, and firstly, ideated: as mediumistic convention, as extant style, and as notional gambit.



View of “Besides, With, Against, and Yet: Abstraction and the Ready-Made Gesture,” 2009. Background, from left: Jacqueline Humphries, *Untitled*, 2009; Kelley Walker, *4870 Series*, 2009; Kerstin Brätsch, *Retrospective*, 2009; Cheyney Thompson, *Chromochrome I-IV*, 2009. Foreground: Polly Apfelbaum, *Bones*, 2000.

Many show their cards explicitly. It is hard to look at Lowman’s catalogue of bulbous and misshapen fruit, *The Rejects*, 2009, uncoupled from Andy Warhol, or Guyton’s ink-jet-on-linen monochrome, *Untitled*, 2009, unmoored from Ad Reinhardt. Such relationships are something of the point. These works insist upon the notion of belonging; they also resist the reification this could imply and thus show images—and techniques—in perpetual transit. Thompson’s meditation on the triptych format, for example, *Chromochrome I-IV*, 2009, redoubles its underlying support through a painstaking process of manual transcription, while Walker’s convolution of painting as printing likewise separates layers of paint into a four-color-process silk screen. Both artists, and many others mentioned above, thereby insist on the notion of support as material and abstract prop. Still, for all its vigor, and despite the patent mobility of each individual work, “Besides” revealed a surprisingly homogeneous mode. It thus hinted that the conceptual underpinnings of this kind of painting might ultimately be merely a means to an end—an end that is, despite itself, aesthetic.

—Suzanne Hudson