COURTESY MASSIMO AUDIELLO

Korean artist Changha Hwang layers a patchwork of grids, resembling computer motherboards, in *Untitled*, 2002.

Driven to Abstraction

After the mind games of conceptualism, abstraction is back—in an interesting range of approaches, as artists reactivate the possibilities of form and color • By Amei Wallach

For decades critics and curators have been dismissing color abstraction in painting as quaintly old-fashioned—a throwback to the 1950s and '60s, before postmodernist doubt changed all the rules. More recently viewers came to expect a work of art to be more than a passive object and, instead, deal knowingly with the social, political, psychological, and market systems that could affect its making and reception. From that perspective, abstract painting looked hopelessly naïve. Only conceptual art, in the form of installation, photography, video, and combine, seemed up to the task.

Look again. In this new, post-postmodern world, in which history and continuity are reasserting their value, abstract painting appears newly relevant. Anselm Kiefer once claimed that Minimalism cleared the chair so that his panoramic paintings, bristling with copper and straw, could sit on it.

COURTESY KARL ERNST OSTHAUS-MUSEUM, HAGEN

Karin Sander's *Pinselstrich Rot* (Red Brushstroke), 1998, is both a painting and a symbol of painting.

Now it seems that more than four decades of conceptualism have prepared a prism through which painters and their audiences can reenvision abstraction. This is particularly true of color and geometric abstractions, which, unlike the often blatantly emotional gestural works, are grounded more in theory and idea.

"A lot of people are talking about the reemergence of abstraction in painting and sculpture," says Eungie Joo, who has been named director of the Walt Disney CalArts Gallery in the new Frank Gehry–designed concert-hall complex in Los Angeles. Her exhibition "Abstruction," pairing abstract paintings with architectural interventions, was recently at Artists Space in New York. "I think abstraction is the language at the end of language," she says. "After conceptualism what do you do? The assumption that you are being didactic leaves you voiceless. As a language, abstraction is the only thing that makes sense so you don't become voiceless."

Recently an abundance of abstract paintings by three generations of artists has surfaced in exhibitions in the United States and Europe. Critic and curator Barbara Rose's exhaustive exegesis on the theme of monochrome painting, titled "Mono-Chrome," which began at Paul Rodgers/9W gallery in New York, will open at Madrid's Museo Nacional Reina Sofía next June. Also in June, at Talbot Rice Gallery in Edinburgh, Sanford Wurmfeld, artist and chair of the art department at Hunter College in New York, will show his 360-degree, surround-view *Cyclorama* (2000), a painting in which the 72 color relationships suggest the vaporous and elusive effect of inhabiting a rainbow. In the last year alone, New York galleries showed such recent color-oriented abstractionists as Monique Prieto and Bernard Piffaretti (Cheim & Read), Angelina Nasso (Stefan Stux), David Krippendorff (Massimo Audiello), Miki Lee (Lyons Wier), Emily Mason (David Findlay Jr.), Jenny Hankwitz (Cheryl Pelavin), Laurie Fendrich (Gary Snyder), Phil Binaco (Linda Durham), Suzanne Caporael (Artemis·Greenberg Van Doren), Eric Freeman and Karin Davie (Mary Boone), Yeardley Leonard (Dee/Glasoe), Tricia Wright and Margaret Neill (Metaphor), John Zinsser (Von Lintel), Hector Leonardi (The Viewing Gallery), and Robert Sagerman (Margaret Thatcher Projects). And there were numerous shows devoted to the previous generation, including Jules Olitski (Ameringer Yohe) and Ellsworth Kelly (Matthew Marks and the Whitney Museum).

For historical context, public television presented "Hans Hofmann, Artist/Teacher, Teacher/Artist," timed to coincide with last spring's survey at the University of California, Berkeley. Also this spring, PaceWildenstein gallery in New York celebrated its representation of the Albers estate with "Josef Albers: Homage to Color," focusing on rarely shown paintings by the artist, considered the guiding spirit of midcentury color-based painting. In a 1991 essay reprinted in the PaceWildenstein catalogue, the late Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd predicted a rosy future for both Albers and color: "In a couple of hundred years, depending on continuance, the color in the art of this century should be seen as a good beginning. There is much more to be done, in fact color is almost brand new in the world."

Just how new was the astonishing revelation of "Seeing Red: An International Exhibition of Nonobjective Painting," which appeared at two Hunter College galleries in New York last spring. By focusing on the single hue red, the show demonstrated not only how many variations there can be within a single color but also how these differences can affect our perceptions of form, light, depth, movement, and even the color itself—for instance, an orange next to a blue translates as pink to the eye. The show was cocurated by Gabriele Evertz, a painter of sumptuous colored stripes and an associate professor of art at Hunter College, and Michael Fehr, director of the Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum in Hagen, Germany. It was the first show to illuminate the German/American trajectory of color painting. Both Hofmann and Albers were Germans who taught generations of American artists; they, in turn, went on to influence European art.

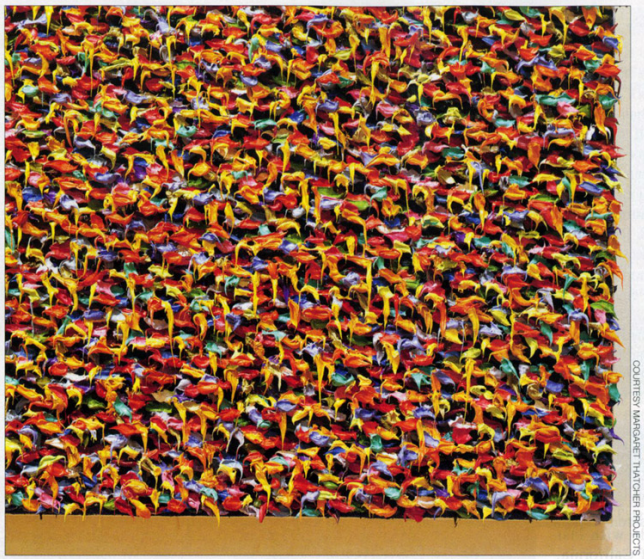
Part I of "Seeing Red," titled "Pioneers of Nonobjective Painting," consisted of 22 paintings by Albers, Hofmann, Richard Anuszkiewicz, and others, including Kenneth Noland, whose strict adherence to critic Clement Greenberg's starvation diet of stringent absolutes in the 1960s had seemed to lead to a dead end. Part II, "Contemporary Nonobjective Painting," included a handful of the pioneers, but most of the 182 paintings on view were by a younger generation of artists. These included midcareer painters who have been working in obscurity, in defiance of prevailing fashions, as well as newcomers to the art scene.

In this context, even the work of the old hands looked fresh and unprecedented. It certainly helped that there was a dazzling range of approaches. But perhaps even more than that, the paintings looked different to eyes that had grown accustomed to searching for the hidden meanings of postmodern and conceptualist works. After the mind games of conceptualism, these paintings charmed with a disarmingly candid physical appeal. To understand and grasp the contradictions of a work like Rolf Rose's 1999 *Untitled*, for example, requires time to reflect on it and space to view it from different angles and distances. The range of red hues layered in acrylic and pigment on zinc reads as black grosgrain until you move and the light catches the shiny, flat surface of the painting. That kind of insistence on a primary experience for the viewer unsettles 30 years of postmodernist teaching, which maintained that there is no such thing as a primary experience; there are only signs—or standins—for experience.

COURTESY VON LINTEL GALLERY

John Zinsser's lush colors and brushstrokes animate *Libra Hour*, 2002.

Amei Wallach is an art critic who has organized a series of programs on religion and the arts for the 92nd Street Y in New York City. On December 9, she will moderate the panel "Memorials and Meaning" with Daniel Libeskind, architect for the World Trade Center site.



COURTESY MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY, NEW YORK

In *Zarqa (26,271)* (detail), 2003, Robert Sagerman takes a personal approach to abstraction by counting and noting the number of strokes he uses to make a painting.

Cocurator Fehr defined the kind of color abstraction addressed in "Seeing Red" as "art which does not represent anything outside itself, but, through interaction with the spectator, performs its function." The premise for the exhibition came from Albers: "I am interested particularly in the psychic effect/esthetic experience caused by the interaction of colors." This was color as a phenomenon capable of altering and confounding perception. To underline the point, there was a two-day symposium at the Goethe-Institut in New York on color theory from the point of view of psychologists, zoologists, biophysicists, and art historians such as John Gage, professor emeritus at Cambridge University. The symposium emphasized the ways in which the brain perceives colors in relation to one another and to the relative values of light and dark. "Color happens in real time," said the artist and professor Robert Swain. "It happens in the moment you are looking at it."

The exhibition also encompassed the conceptual fancies of German artist Karin Sander, whose 1998 *Pinselstrich Rot* (Red Brushstroke) consisted of a single red brushstroke built from layers of acrylic paint on a prepared white wall, at once a painting and a symbol of painting, and of Norwegian Thomas Pihl, who invited news of the real world into his layered translucent fields of indeterminate colors that intimate the corroded surfaces of the urban environment. For Pihl the "*need* to use your senses" in viewing abstract painting is the desirable alternative to a universe so inundated with information that "you don't have the choice to use your senses."

"Seeing Red" drew attention to the art world's renewed interest in artists who have been working in the abstract-painting idiom all along, with little hope of ever having a gallery show. Three years ago, the abstract painter Julian Jackson and the figurative painter Rene Lynch opened Metaphor Contemporary Art in the D.U.M.B.O. section of Brooklyn. Three-quarters of the artists in the gallery are abstract painters, many in their 40s, for whom Metaphor was the first gallery where they could have a solo show.

Even so prominent a figure as Julian Stanczak, a grand master of the Op art of the 1960s (conspicuous in both the pioneers and contemporary-practitioners section of "Seeing Red") hadn't had a New York gallery for some time, despite a recent 50-year retrospective jointly produced by the Butler Institute of American Art and the Columbus Museum of Art as well as a show this summer at the McNay Museum in San Antonio, Texas. Now Stanczak has joined the Stefan Stux Gallery in Chelsea. There the Polish émigré, who lost an arm in Siberia, will join Angelina Nasso, who had the distinction, unique in the art world, of representing her native Australia in the Miss World Pageant of 1985. Nasso's debt to Stanczak's generation is apparent in her dexterity with visual effects. Beneath her slick surfaces, she blurs circles of color that often seem to take their hint from the hyper-intense hues of the television screen.

Abstraction's renaissance has everything to do with the insatiable appetite of artists to make new arguments on painting's behalf in a period pervaded by conceptualism and digital art. Their challenge has been to reactivate the possibilities of form and color by introducing new strategies.

Among such efforts have been those of French artist Piffaretti,

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Op artist of the 1960s Julian Stanczak is back, with gallery and museum shows. His works, like *Constellation in Red*, 2002–3, are newly influential.

whose self-critical portrayal of creation and imitation is achieved by painting an abstraction on one side of the canvas, then drawing a line down the center and repeating the image not quite verbatim on the other side, initiating an unending process of mutual reflection. Canadian artist Karin Davie burlesques the stripe, icon of color painting, as taffy-pulled, undulating ribbons that create havoc with perception in a manic eruption of energy. Korean artist Changha Hwang paints what is before his eyes. He layers a painted patchwork of diverse grids, like so many discarded computer motherboards, over a landscape of media-savvy colors. "I live in this contemporary society, and what appeals to my eyes comes from a historical background of hard-edged geometric abstraction," he says. "I am attracted to the infinite possibilities of abstract languages. I feel I am tracing evidence, trying to capture the truth."

COURTESY METAPHOR CONTEMPORARY ART

Tricia Wright's poured-acrylic canvas *Dragon*, 2002, seduces with unexpected forms and color combinations.

Now there's a retro word. "Truth" harks back to the modernist belief in absolutes. Postmodernism doubted there was such a thing. The reemergence of abstraction has revived the language of belief. At Luhring Augustine gallery this summer, director Claudia Altman-Siegel dared to utter the word "sincere" in describing the work of the artists in the gallery's "New Slang: Emerging Voices in Sculpture" exhibition. It included one painter, 27-year-old Texas-born Justin Adian. His latex-on-canvas paintings are a warped twist on Agnes Martin's pastel palette and Kelly's shaped canvases. Adian's colors are uncertain, his stripes so vague they myopically invade one another's space. *Never You Mind* (2003) appears to wobble, the shape of the canvas cheekily declining to present a clear direction or commit to the angle of an edge. In his case, "sincere" refers to the insouciant assurance of an artist born into a postmodern skepticism that is so constitutional he can joke about it.

Of the artists increasingly mixing abstract painting with more conceptual tools, Robert Sagerman offers one of the most personal and radical new directions. Sagerman is a doctoral candidate in Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University. His fields of color have the physical presence of a shag rug because they are built up with tiny flickers of pigment that he mixes himself and daubs on with a knife. He says he arrived at this process in an effort toward achieving self-awareness and to slow himself down. "I exaggerated all this material to make a painting that in the end is a mode of portrayal of nothing," he explains. He counts each stroke that it takes to build one of his paintings, takes notes in ledgers, and makes videos that scroll through the numbers of marks. Sometimes he exhibits all three together—ledgers, videos, and paintings. The title of his exhibition at Margaret Thatcher Projects last spring was "435,546 Marks."

COURTESY CHEIM & READ, NEW YORK

Bernard Piffaretti's conceptualism is evident in *Untitled*, 1999, a diptych showing a pattern on one side and its replica on the other.

As with many artists working in color abstraction, Sagerman endeavors to overcome the limitations of painting by expanding its parameters. He's making his abstraction conceptual as well as concrete, process as well as product, a commentary on experience as well as the experience itself.

There was a time, he points out, when artistic and spiritual pursuits were compatible and pragmatic. The 13th-century cabalists believed they were creating something concrete and real—science, mathematics, and gold. In our time, when the meaning of reality itself is up for grabs, abstraction's struggle is to establish its relevance. What is real now, says Sagerman, is that "I'm a modern, 21st-century American artist, and in the end, I know I'm just making paintings." ■