

# VIVID

Karen Azoulay  
Jordan Broadworth  
Angela Leach  
Scott Silverthorn  
Julie Voyce

# VIVID

Karen Azoulay  
Jordan Broadworth  
Angela Leach  
Scott Silverthorn  
Julie Voyce

University of Waterloo Art Gallery  
Curator Carol Podedworny  
Curator & Guest Writer Virginia M. Eichhorn



*While much of the new abstraction appears visually related to the formalist concerns prevalent in the 1960s, it arises from distinctly different aesthetic and philosophical intentions, ones ironically linked more to the legacy of both Pop and Conceptual art. In the new abstraction there exists a desire to question its autonomy and return it to the realm of the everyday.<sup>1</sup>*

The earliest forms of abstraction - those which Colpitt terms "historical" and "contemporary"<sup>2</sup> - developed directly from Manet's experimentations with flatness in the now legendary painting *The Fifer*, in the mid-19th century. Greenberg's developmental analysis of that work<sup>3</sup>, as well as the work that he argued followed upon its formal heels in North America in the early-20th century, is described as sharing a heritage based on formalist aesthetics. A heritage that has identified its criteria as: autonomy, universality, developmental advance, originality and self-referentiality. The primacy of the work's intention: to the avant-garde and/or the spiritual, was maintained for decades. Guilbaut was among the first to reveal the ideological implications of modernism in his book, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 1983<sup>4</sup>. While Greenberg's analysis had heralded "highest achievement"; Guilbaut's heralded "freedom." The latter's publication signaled the need for art historians to re-frame their historical assumptions about abstraction. Could it be that abstraction was much more than simply the result of either the highly subjective responses of the human psyche or, the rational, methodology of a progressive developmental advance? From its birth in the mid-19th century, through its various permutations in the 1950s (AbEx), 1960s (doctrinaire formalism), and 1970s (post-minimalism), as well as its re-generation in the 1980s (ironic positioning in the postmodern era)<sup>5</sup>: abstraction has expressed a surprising number of aesthetic and political intentions. In that the abstract was fully introduced into art at the beginning of the 20th century, it seems pertinent to reflect on its current roles at the beginning of the 21st.<sup>6</sup>

The first return to abstraction in painting and sculpture in the postmodern era occurred in 1981; the first critical response to it in 1987. It has been argued that "postmodern" abstraction in the 1980s was "informed by theory rather than traditions of painting or abstraction."<sup>7</sup> Yet, the art of the last decade - while certainly informed by the practice in the 1980s, as well as by that of modernist practices in abstraction - is nonetheless, more likely to search for relevance elsewhere. There seem to be at least two reasons for the current return. On the one hand, and with homage to Guilbaut, civil society is in turmoil and in the past, abstraction has shown itself capable of being able to answer the call to 'represent' an unstable moment in history. On the other hand, there seems to be an almost unconscious desire to move post-postmodernism, that is, past the heavy weight of postmodernism's theoretical baggage. In this there seems great intent - as Lyon and Emenhiser note - to re-habilitate the aesthetic experience.<sup>8</sup>

With respect to the zeitgeist of the current moment, in Guilbaut's book, he argued that one of the ideological reasons for Abstract Expressionism rested in its ability to - without sentiment, propaganda, or condescension - represent the impossible.<sup>9</sup> Amongst Guilbaut's arguments for the particular "Americanism" of the style, was his belief that abstraction offered the artists of the day the possibility of expressing the absurdity of a world at war and a population under the control of corporate greed.

*The freedom of expression and existential violence that leap to the eye in the works of the abstract expressionists were in fact products of fear and of the impossibility of representation, of the need to avoid literary expression ... faced with annihilation of the individual [WWII] and absorption of the individual by capitalism ... they sought independence and intentional consciousness ...<sup>10</sup>*

Amidst worldwide fears of Armageddon stoked by the coming of the new millennium in 2000, to Desert Storm, 9/11, the War Against Terror, and the war in Iraq, we have found ourselves nestled in an unstable moment in history. That the politics of abstraction have already been recognized, helps to confirm and ground the validity of an abstract practice engaged with the "everyday." This is not "art for art's sake" but rather a new world of representation.

Yet, the milieu of fear and dissension does not appear to explain everything, as Emenhiser suggests, there is also a conscious attempt amongst artists to deal with the immensely critical gaze of postmodernism. In this respect, artists want to answer the call for studio concerns such as aesthetics and beauty.

*As a result of the thoroughness of this [postmodern] critique even non-representative codes are now wincing under the same harsh glare. Every gesture aspiring to heroism, every fleshy undulation, every seductive finish seems now to sag slightly - condemned a priori to existence as a consumer fetish of a gendered gaze.*

*Given this hostile environment, it is not surprising to find painters and sculptors shifting away from a postmodern discourse in which they feel disenfranchised ...<sup>11</sup>*

Driven away from the aesthetic experience in postmodernism due to its weighty theoretical critique, abstract artists today want to reclaim materiality and creativity as topics for discussion in art-making. However, the return to an art that might elicit an 'aesthetic emotion' is not with respect to Kant's intellectual sublime, but rather to something else: to something artist Lydia Dona calls the retinals of conceptualization - desire as opposed to mere pleasure.<sup>12</sup> That is pleasure, but pleasure that recognizes the postmodern lessons regarding the implications of power in that pleasure.<sup>13</sup> Rather than re-institute Kant's notion of the sublime: "a thrill at the power of human reason," artists now carry with them an uneasy awareness of the internal limits of that power.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, as the aesthetic emotion becomes qualified as "desire" (versus pleasure), so artists find themselves without an avant-garde and subsequently in a more relational place where context cannot be denied.<sup>15</sup>

*Rather than considering art as something separate from "everything else," Leach [et al] consider "everything else" as integral to art.<sup>16</sup>*

Historians and critics vary on their interpretation of what aspect(s) of the real are those that engage the abstract artists of the present era. The only collectively agreed upon notion, is that artists are not swayed from the contextualization of their practice in the "real." For instance, Sangster suggests that the new abstraction is a consequence of responses to the new spaces of transaction and exchange for art.<sup>17</sup> Grosz believes that it is a consequence of the re-ordering of representation in light of post-structuralist theories.<sup>18</sup> Salzman suggests that we now function within a new concept of time,<sup>19</sup> while Wallace professes the significance of the polyvalent uncertainty of the time.<sup>20</sup> Whatever, the cause, it seems certain that artists today recognize both postmodern concerns of context, relation and concept; as well as the acknowledged formal power of modernist abstraction. Thus, artists producing in an abstract mode today recognize the folly of denying the influence of the day-to-day in their art making; as they also acknowledge their desire to attribute to art something that will raise it above pop culture, mass communications and the day-to-day.



Working in one of the most highly transmutable information networks ever, artists today posit an ironic positioning of the rationale of the real against the unconscious passion of the aesthetic experience.

VIVID is an exhibition about current abstract practices in the work of five Toronto-based artists: Karen Azoulay, Jordan Broadworth, Angela Leach, Scott Silverthorn and Julie Voyce. These artists have turned to abstraction with, on the one hand, a studio interest in the formal demands and aesthetics of the style and, on the other hand, the conviction that every day reality informs the content of their work. This latter interest has been the concern of other artists and, of other recent exhibitions of abstraction, however VIVID brings together the work of five artists whose content is directly related to the practice and theory of art-making. Each of the artists produces work that is informed by either some form of artistic genre: fibre arts, illustration and design, craft, architecture; or by the methodological practices of the visual arts: art history and formal analysis. These associations are significant for the re-interpretation of the artists' practice in relation to a history of abstraction and for the understanding and evolution of abstraction within contemporary practice.

CP

## References

1. Keith Wallace, Visual Stimulants: Leach, Singer, Stanbridge, Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, (2000): 18.
2. Francis Colpitt, (editor), Abstract Art in the Late 20th Century, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, (2002): xvi.
3. See for instance, Clement Greenberg, Art & Culture, Boston: Beacon Press, (1961).
4. Serge Guilbaut, How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, (1983).
5. Judith Nasby, Contingency & Continuity: Negotiating New Abstraction, Guelph: MacDonald Stewart Art Centre, (1999): 3.
6. Gary Sangster in Marcia Tucker, (editor), Cadences: Icon & Abstraction in Context, New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, (1991): "Thinking Through Abstract Objects," p. 12.
7. Colpitt, (2002): xvi.
8. Karen Emenhiser in Buttered Side Up, Buffalo, New York: Hallwalls, (1996): "Puerile Utopias," p.9.
9. Guilbaut, (1983): 197.
10. Ibid.
11. Emenhiser, (1996): 6.
12. Lydia Dona in New York Abstraction: A Symposium, Guelph: MacDonald Stewart Art Centre, (1996): 11.
13. Emenhiser, (1996): 12.
14. Ibid.
15. Dot Tuer in Gregory Salzman, (introduction), "Abstraction Today," C Magazine, (1994): 20 - 29.
16. Wallace, (2000): 28.
17. Sangster, (1991): 7 - 27.
18. Elizabeth Grosz in Tucker, Cadences, (1991): "Signs, Meaning & Matter in Abstract Art," pp. 49 - 59.
19. Gregory Salzman, (introduction), "Abstraction Today," C Magazine, (1994): 20 - 29.
20. Wallace, (2000): 18.

In a 1999 article on Jackson Pollock, Arthur C. Danto wrote "The drips affirmed that paint has an expressive life of its own, that it is not a passive paste to be moved where the artist wants it to be moved but possesses a fluid energy over which the painter endeavors to exercise control. The act of painting then is like a match between two opposed wills, like the act of taming tigers." This domination of the drip, so-to-speak, has been an ongoing struggle for **Jordan Broadworth** in his paintings. For Broadworth had always felt frustrated with the hierarchy of figure to ground. It seemed to him that whatever "mark" was put on a work became more significant than the ground. It was from this desire to have figure and ground of equal importance that his abstract paintings germinated.

In effect what Broadworth determined to do was to develop a "gesture" within his paintings which could become read as a sign or motif. Gestures and drips were then embedded in the surface of the painting which thereby allowed him to achieve an integration between figure and ground. With this integration, the "drip" could then be open for interpretation: it could allow the work to be about presence or memory, about archaeology or absence.

Abstraction in painting allows Broadworth to jumble together contrasting elements that reference past and present, modernism and post, control and chance. This ambiguity of content is reinforced in his deliberate choosing of titles that use words which are both nouns and verbs. Broadworth's paintings are about authentic painterly experience. Almost meditative in feel they encapsulate a subtle and deliberate approach to abstraction in which it appears that he has been successful in taming the tiger of which Danto wrote.

VME



the stretching of wool with a polished structure of wall and warp create extensive possibilities for the weaver. The discipline of integrating colour changes into the structure allows for a variety of patterns to emerge. Angela Leach has stated that it is important for her to do work which the weaver can see as coming directly out of her experience as a weaver, incorporating into them the important elements of order and number patterns. Order in colour management is paramount and her previously executed system of colour is used in establishing order. All elements of the large scale limited palette are worked out in advance. Leach begins her process by writing down a list of colours from there, she arranges them so that the shades change from light to dark. Her methodical, analytical approach to abstraction is well-suited to the



Jordan Broadworth, *Report*, 2003, oil on canvas, 60 x 61 in

## VIVID

Karen Azoulay, Jordan Broadworth, Angela Leach, Scott Silverthorn, Julie Voyce

January 8 - February 12, 2004

### UWAG Director & Exhibition Curator

### Curator & Guest Writer

### Photography

### Publication Management

### Graphic Design

Carol Podedworny (CP)

Virginia M. Eichhorn (VME)

Karen Azoulay, Angela Leach & Julie Voyce - Dean Goodwin, Toronto

Jordan Broadworth - Camilla Singh, Toronto

Scott Silverthorn - Robert McNair, Waterloo

PE.r Creative for the Arts, Kitchener-Waterloo & Toronto

Leonid Rozenberg / PE.r

ISBN 0 - 9693823 - 6 - 7

I. Podedworny, Carol, 1959

II. Eichhorn, Virginia M., 1962

III. Contemporary Canadian Art.

IV. VIVID

V. University of Waterloo Art Gallery

University of Waterloo Art Gallery

200 University Avenue West

Waterloo, ON, N2L 3G1

Tel 519-888-4567 ext 3575

Fax 519-746-4982

[www.artgallery.uwaterloo.ca](http://www.artgallery.uwaterloo.ca)

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO  
art gallery

Waterloo

© Copyright, 2004, UW Art Gallery. All rights reserved.

The exhibition was supported with the generous assistance of the Ontario Arts Council. The University of Waterloo Art Gallery gratefully acknowledges the on-going support of the University of Waterloo through the Faculty of Arts, the Department of Fine Arts and, the Student Services Advisory Committee.

ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL  
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO