

# TUSSLE

## The Cohen, Butler, Heilman, Yankowitz and Jiménez Index

By Saul Ostrow, October 29, 2022

For the sake of this article, I have ganged together five exhibitions; Nina Yankowitz (*Can A Women Have A One Man Show*, [Eric Firestone Gallery](#)), Cora Cohen (*Works from the 1980s*, [Morgan Presents](#)), Sharon Butler (*Next Moves*, [Jennifer Baahng](#)), Mary Heilmann (*Daydream*, [303 Gallery](#)) and Ivelisse Jiménez (*Image Schema*, [Latchkey Gallery](#)) as if they formed a thematic group show.

Likewise, even though more than half the works under consideration were made 40 to 50 years ago, I have chosen to deal with them ahistorically — that is synchronically. I do this not only because, these artists' works manifest the overlapping aesthetics concerns, identified with “abstract painting” since its emergence in Western art in the early 20th Century, but because they offer me the opportunity to reflect the role similarity and difference play in the formulation of identity.

My objective, in bringing them together is to generate a context in which the correspondences and divergences between these artists' ambitions, misgivings, and practices unfold to reveal an underlying operating system of perception, cognition, structure, aesthetic that gives form to their visual vocabulary, and sensibility. These elements inform the objectives that their art attentively, or unintentionally serves. I'm aware the given sampling is limited, in that it consists of works, significantly influenced by the post-minimalist ethos of the late 1960-70s, made by four white-women and one Puerto Rican of color, I recognize their works constitutes one possible index among others of “abstract painting's” immanent social and aesthetic complexities.

From their work I have concluded that they challenge the tradition of abstract painting from a position that is more nuanced than that of the reductivity and negativity of modernism, which required the simplification of very complex situations. Their work represents a feminization of abstract painting not because they are women but because their work is polyvocal – this is in keeping with Shirley Kaneda's 1991 article in Arts

Magazine, "Painting and Its Others, The Feminine in Abstract Painting". In this context, the work of these five artists, can be thought to be an attempt to refashion the entropic masculine logic of a modernism, which is no longer capable of productively sustaining itself. Ironically, this state of affairs is a result of Modernism having in the 1950s, become the dominant tradition in the Western culture. With this arts' practices and criteria no longer had an authoritative, conservative body of practices and values to push up against — to stand in critical opposition to. Ultimately, the modernist vanguard had no choice but to self-critically question its own master-narratives of history, autonomy, identity, essentialism, originality, progress, etc.



Cora Cohen, *Untitled 3085-7 (Can Can Dancer)*, 1987, Flashe and oil on linen, 70 x 66 inches Image courtesy of Morgan Presents

Post-modernism's paradigmatic shift away from the Platonic and Kantian conception of a world of fixed a priori things/forms has resulted in a return to the Aristotelian notion of change as organic rather than as linear, instrumental and developmental. Yet as in all such reforms these changes were grafted onto those modernist notion, which persisted. From this the proposal that everything is inherently heterodoxical, problematically befuddled issues of identity, agency, and subjectivity because within this post-Modernism nothing is original, everything is derivative. From this state of affairs,

change and innovation rather than being immanent in existent forms and practices, results from their critical disentanglement from a dense network of genealogies, disciplinary thought, and aesthetic ideologies. In this economy the criteria for significance are based on how artists and their audience's determine; what is possible, what is necessary, what is pointless, and what is mere novelty. In this case innovation rather than merely deconstructing art's apriori collective identity, must contribute to those internal or external aspects that make art distinct from other such practices, or advance its dissolution. What has been learned from this post-Modernism is not to undervalue those practices that appear to fail to contribute to the "advancement" of the schematization of the prime object of a dominant paradigm.

Ideologically, to reconfigure Western culture, so it might be less elitist (obscure) and more socially and politically meaningful, Modernism and its critique were to be dismantled because they were too formalist, too esoteric, too high-minded, too chauvinistic, too alienating, too racially exclusive, etc. Collaterally, the type of abstract painting these artists' work to sustain has been critically marginalized. Problematically, the post-Modern culture of approachability, replication, and identity, which took its place has been used by neo-liberals and neo-conservatives alike to instrumentally and institutionally advance the logic of standardization, purposefulness, and the transactional, which stands in stark contrast to the work of these artists.



Ivelisse Jimenez, *adapted variant file #1*, 2020, Enamel over vinyl Courtesy of the artist and LatchKey Gallery.

None of the five artists in question are hardcore Modernist, in that they have abandoned the formalist orthodoxy and historical determinism of mid-century Modernism. Their works are hybrids based upon internal dialogs as well as ruminations on the viability of various formalist strategies. Likewise, by stepping outside the constraints of vanguardism with its emphasis on negation and innovation these artists use abstract painting to both exercise and explore the interiority of their freedom (what

they can do) as well as its limits. Premised on this, rather than surrendering to the indifferent, the sentimental or the ironic these artists practices assert that the analytic and the subjective do not form a dichotomy in need of resolution but instead constitute a dynamic, heterogeneous union. This can be seen as constituting both a response and a resistance to the postmodern condition of inauthenticity, simulation and replication.

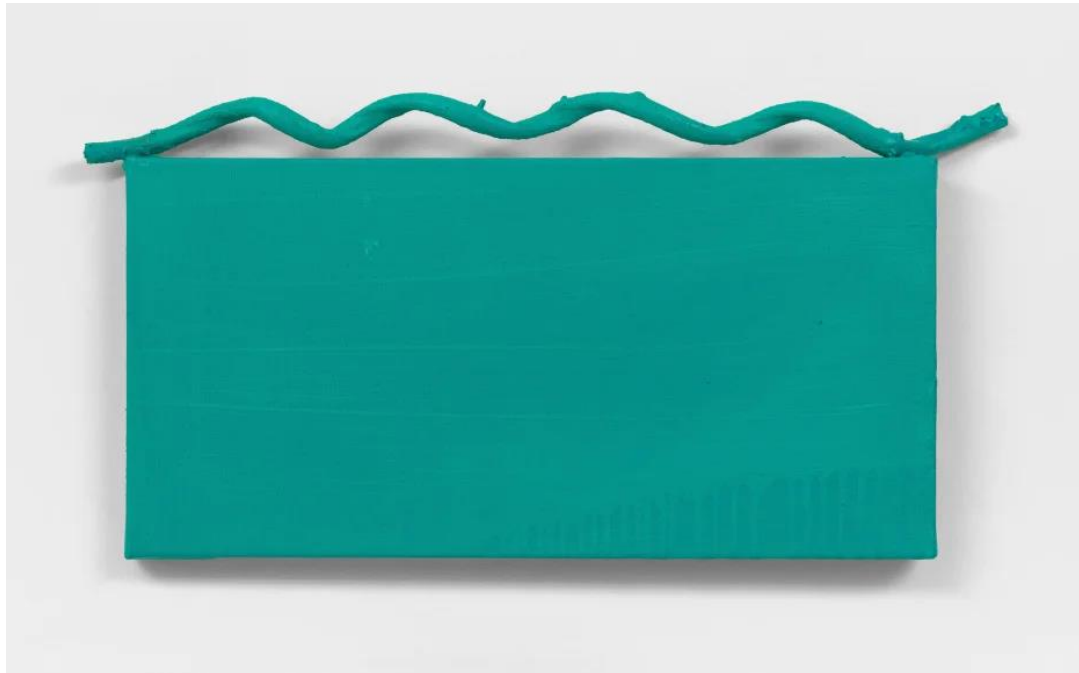
From a formalist point-of-view the works of these five artists may be thought to be an assemblage of inconsistencies, anomalies, and decorative embellishments, while from a contemporary point-of-view they are seen as little more than formalist exercises, because they lack a modicum of the disingenuous and the ironic. Yet, such views fail to recognize that the differing approaches, aspirations, and sensibilities represented by these artists works reflect the politics of an embodied aesthetics by which structural (formal) issues by analogy are implicitly social and political.

Acknowledging this abstract painting is repositioned as a social practice, because it addresses the social aesthetic of our times. We might think of the work of these five painters among numerous others in the US and internationally such as the Belgium painter Raoul De Keyser, Shirley Jaffe, Jack Whitten, David Reed, Jonathan Lasker, Dennis Hollingsworth, Joanne Greenbaum, Samuel Jablon, Julie Sass who in the face of the existential crisis brought on by WW II and the end of the industrial age, are committed to sustaining the on-going-ness of art's discourse concerning freedom and expression. While acknowledging the impossibility of resolving the fundamental contradictions of conception, stimuli, and cognition at the core of contemporary Western society, these artists remain committed to keeping such indeterminacies in constant play by generating a sense of undecidability, which simultaneously pulls the viewer in different directions.

Given that the principal concerns of abstract painting since its conception in the West have been both aesthetic and cognitive, each of these painters self-reflectively rather than programmatically constructs an assemblage of (potentially conservable) qualities, manifesting a phenomenological conception of the abstract as a thing/event/situation whose subjects are perception and judgment. To bring this to the fore, abstract paintings are intended to inhibit those acts of recognition that might lead to symbolic or didactic meaning. In doing this, these artists seek to preserve an experiential order based on sensation and reflectivity, rather than on representation. Ostensibly, the works under discussion cannot be appropriated or displaced by some form of mechanical representation, this is not because they will lose their "aura" but because they will lose their materiality and presence — their *sense datum*, which is at their core.

Cora Cohen's works from the 1980s, consist of the clash between thin painterly process-oriented color field-like and gestural ground and the autographic gestures and marks associated with expressionism. Yet, the results are not expressionist in the vernacular sense the word has come to connote. Cohen's brush-work forms abstract impasto configurations — baroque, Soutine-esque aggregates of short stroke-like marks. These do not interact with the ground image — it's as if two paintings occupy the same canvas. So, while the results are distinctly figure-ground, they are image-less events that resonate with the ethos of European *L'informale* rather than *AbEx*. Cohen achieves this by avoiding giving her paintings neither a horizontal (landscape) nor vertical orientation.

Nina Yankowitz spray painted and stained unstretched and pleated printings from the late 60- early 70s, concretely externalize the tensions and conflict of painting's inherent Illusion and literalism. Unlike Cohen, Yankowitz aesthetic is lyrical as well as physical. As with many post-Minimalists and Feminists, Yankowitz at the time was concerned with what her chosen/ given materials would allow her to do —the canvas came to be draped forms, and the formless sprayed or stained paint a unifying multi-colored field of color at times descriptive of the form and at other times not.



Mary Heilmann, *Glassy Wall*, 2020, Acrylic on wood and canvas, 9 x 18 1/4 x 1 1/8 inches

Ivelisse Jiménez approach to abstract painting, like Yankowitz and Cohen is that of a materialist, yet her approach is collagist. Her work asserts its physicality as a means to establish the being of abstract art as an aesthetic rather than a formal proposition. She does this by physically deconstructing into its components the very being of abstract painting as an object. Working with a mixture of mediums and processes, Jimenez produces densely colored, layered vinyl curtains and eccentric architectural forms occupying the literal space of the room. As such her installations abandon the notion of a singular viewpoint as her assemblage expands in all directions.

While Sharon Butler and Mary Heilmann strategies are significantly different from Yankowitz, Cohen and Jimenez's materialist approach, they are equally concerned with articulating painting's dual nature as a literal form and an articulated surface-configuration. Butler's work tends toward the pictorial and manifests its "self" by means of eccentric compositions of colored shapes or the juxtapositions of regular forms, which on occasion extends beyond the stretchers edge. She will also use differing formats. Where Heilmann's works differs from Butler's is in her material sensibility and playfulness in that it is less analytic. Heilmann's images are sensuously painted, associative in form, quirky and often employ a positive and negative spatial flux, Butler's forms are more geometric, static, and conceptual. Comparably, Butler deploys fracture and stylistic disparity within a single work, while Heilmann deploys from canvas-to-canvas various abstract genres—ranging from the monochromatic to the

pictorial yet avoids fragmentation as she strives to produce a sense of all-at-onceness. As in all the works under consideration here, Heilmann's dialogical approach becomes the means to generate a wide range of conceptual associations.



Installation view: Sharon Butler: Next Moves, Jennifer Baahng Gallery, New York, 2022.

Content-wise the qualities and processes these five painters employ form hypotheses, whose truths and thoughtfulness are not pronounced, but can be construed from the inter-play of the assembled elements, terms and conditions. If we go by this index, their work in its non-linearity can be likened to the Baroque. If we take this to be their art historical reference, we can infer their undertakings constitute an endeavor to turn structure into sign. From this, we may conclude that while these works are self-referential, they also stand-in-the-place of their referent, as an index of qualities that describes both itself, while indicating still some other thing/event/situation. In the case of the historical Baroque, the exaggerated forms and structures expressed the turbulent decentering of the Christian world, which was a consequence of the Reformation, counter-reformation and the age of exploration.

What we may take away from the works of these five artists is that they share four objectives: the first is to preserve the critical tradition of abstract painting, second to revise, revitalize, and sustain it, thirdly to exploit, challenge or negate its conventions, fourth, to provide a sense of embodied subjectivity rather than a formal or narrative closure. The results of these ambitions are manifested as a resistance to the viewers' desire to schematize bodily sensation and give them a conceptual form that is replacing the initial stimulus its representation. Such acts of recognition make a thing semi-familiar before it is encountered— as such it is assumed that it will adhere to the

viewer's abstract model and associations. Their common strategy is to use colors, textures, shapes, forms, patterns, and processes to produce aggregates that are contradictorily sensuous and evocative, arbitrary and systematic, factual and non-referential, etc. By inducing an awareness of the multiple considerations by which our world is ordered in the abstract, the work of these five artists challenge the notion of abstract art as an integrated transcendent self. Instead, they approach abstract painting in a manner akin to Sigmar Polke's wholistic conception of painting—as a category of diverse possibilities rather than that of Gerhard Richter who bifurcates painting stylistically into the end states of abstract and the mimetic. What the wholistic approach does is to set aside the cognitive veil of pre-comprehension and meaning by making all painting simultaneously abstract and mimetic. This leaves the viewer with the task of determining the nature of the thing before them. As such, we may imagine that the paintings of the five artists under discussion are thoughtless, while their makers and viewers are asymmetrically thoughtful.