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ABSTRACT PAINTING: The New Casualists

By Sharon L. Butler

The pioneers of abstraction—the Cubists, the Abstract Expressionists, the Minimalists—emerged from firm and identifiable aesthetic roots and developed their own philosophies. In the competitive maelstrom of 20th century art, those philosophies became dogmas, and the dogmas outright manifestos. In the new century, many abstract painters are saying goodbye to all that didactic thinking and exuding a kind of calculated tentativeness. Raphael Rubinstein, in a 2009 *Art in America* essay and for a 2011 painting exhibition he curated in London, dubbed this new type of abstraction "provisional painting." Similarly, artist and critic Stephen Maine homed in on the "incipient image" in a March 2011 show he curated at Lesley Heller. And the Brooklyn curatorial team Progress Report (aka Kris Chatterson and Vince Contarino) styled its survey of contemporary abstraction at the Bronx River Art Center *The Working Title*. All three labels suggest the centrality of the open proposition in contemporary abstraction.

Martin Bromirski, "Untitled" (2011). Acrylic, sand, paper on canvas. 20 × 16″.

Rebecca Morris, "Untitled (#06-10)" (2010). Oil on canvas. 59 × 59″.

There is a studied, passive-aggressive incompleteness to much of the most interesting abstract work that painters are making today. But the subversion of closure isn't their only priority. They also harbor a broader concern with multiple forms of imperfection: not merely what is unfinished but also the off-kilter, the overtly offhand, the not-quite-right. The idea is to cast aside the neat but rigid fundamentals learned in art school and embrace everything that seems to lend itself to visual intrigue—including failure. The painters take a meta approach that refers not just to earlier art historical styles, but back to the process of painting itself. These self-amused but not unserious painters have abandoned the rigorously structured propositions and serial strategies of previous generations in favor of playful, unpredictable encounters. Pervading the work of artists like Lauren Luloff, Cordy Ryman, Amy Feldman, and Joe Bradley is an enervated casualness that may at first recall sophomore-year painting class.

If this sounds disparaging, it's not meant to be. By reassessing basic elements like color, composition, and balance, based on 1920s-vintage Bauhaus principles taught in every 2-D foundations course, the new painters are exploring uncharted territory. They are looking for unexpected outcomes rather than handsome results. Dashing our expectations of "good painting," painters like Martin Bromirski, Patricia Trieb, Patrick Brennan, Jered Sprecher, and Keltie Ferris have challenged their validity and thus moved painting in a direction that requires a different way of looking.If a painting seems lousy, perhaps with a poorly constructed support and amateurish paint handling, look again.

Some painters focus on developing a style and spend 20 years refining it. These new abstract

painters, on the other hand, are restless, their thrust less intensive and more expansive. Artists like Rochelle Feinstein and Chris Martin (whose first museum solo opens at the Corcoran on June 18) combine non-art materials in their paintings just for the hell of it, work at different scales, employ different color combinations, and experiment with unusual ways of applying paint. With less investment in honing a unique visual language, painters like Kadar Brock, Rebecca Morris, and Jasmine Justice use earlier forms of abstraction the way Rauschenberg used found objects. In the process, there is no room for handwringing about originality; it is simply assumed that it will result from synthesis and recombination. And if it doesn't, well, isn't that just as interesting?

Patrick Brennan, "Flow and Fade" (2011). Mixed media on canvas. 72 × 48″.

Amy Feldman, "Ever After" (2010). Acrylic and spray paint on canvas. 80 × 90.″

Insofar as the new abstract painters employ old tropes and methods with a certain insouciant abandon, one might call them the new casualists. Yet they are not as iconoclastic as they might appear. In *Malevich and the American Legacy*, a recent exhibition at Gagosian, curator Andrea Crane attempts to position Malevich's Supremetism as a progenitor of Minimalism. But in my view, Malevich's small-scale, quirky abstractions have more in common with the new casualism than the austere, highly refined minimalism of Judd, Stella, Kelly, and the like. Malevich believed that pure feeling was to be found in non-objective painting, and that materialism could lead to "spiritual freedom." Both Malevich and the new casualists, who approach their work intuitively, are unfazed by ill-defined parameters or truncated lines of thought. Like the philosopher-mathematicians who devised "fuzzy logic," new casualists, like Suprematists, seek to accommodate a world in which there is often no clear truth or falseness. On balance, they are more intrigued by the questions and contradictions in art than by any definitive answers it might provide.

At Jason McCoy, Stephanie Simmons curated *70 Years of Abstract Paintings: Excerpts*, which comprises a good survey of small-scale work by more than 40 artists. The exhibition presents a convincing historical context for the new post-Bauhaus abstraction. Old paintings by Josef Albers, Gene Davis, Jackson Pollock, Al Held, Man Ray, Hedda Sterne, Hans Hofmann, Leon Polk Smith, and Friedel Dzubas are hung side-by-side with recent work by Jim Lee, Joe Fyfe, Rob Nadeau, Sharon Horvath, Cora Cohen, Gwenn Thomas, and Thomas Nozkowski, among others. For most of the artists, their experience of everyday life is the filter through which they focus their paintings, entertaining multiple contradictory ideas at once. Although many of the artists included in the exhibition also work larger, Simmons selected small-scale work so that she could fit as much as possible into the show without marginalizing the smaller pieces. Tellingly,

the smaller paintings tend not to be studies for larger work; rather, she told me, “working at different scales is one way they avoid a formulaic approach.”

If the new casualism resists evaluation on traditional criteria, how should it be judged? Here, perhaps, the Minimalists are relevant. Ellsworth Kelly once said, “I have never been interested in painterliness…putting marks on a canvas. My work is a different way of seeing and making something which has a different use.” A new casualist might well make the same general claim. But while Kelly wants to take the personal out of the equation, the casualist believes that exploring even mundanely subjective perceptions can yield extraordinary insights. In many ways, the new approach to abstraction is indebted to female artists of the 1970s like Elizabeth Murray, Mary Kelly, and Ree Morton, who, railing against the macho posturing of the Minimalists, worked from an intimate point of view that embraced messy everyday detail. The new casualists are adapting a like attitude to an increasingly complex, unfamiliar, and multivalent world. If the viewer leaves a show of their paintings agitated by their abrupt shifts, their crosscurrents, and their purposeful lack of formal cohesion, the work has succeeded.

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