

**It Looks Easy: A Cross Section of Recent Painting in Chicago**  
 Gallery 400  
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While viewing this recent painting exhibit, I was reminded of Mark Twain's oft repeated quote, "The rumors of my death are greatly exaggerated." After many years of hearing of the demise of painting, it's clear that the rumors of its death are greatly exaggerated. "It Looks Easy: A Cross Section of Recent Painting in Chicago" is the title of the show curated by Phyllis Bramson, Julia Fish, and Susan Sensemann, three faculty members in the fine arts department at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The fact that all three women are themselves painters lends special credence to an exhibit that, in Fish's words printed in the accompanying "conversation" brochure, is intended to represent the variety of painting in this city, but "not Chicago painting." In other words, no attempt was made to seek out or

artificially group together artists into some kind of local style or movement, à la Chicago Imagism. This fact is one of the strengths of the show.

In the context of this exhibit, and presumably by the curators' own definition, painting can be a heavily worked, painted canvas or a few pieces of tape stuck on the wall, and everything in between. To say that some of these works push the parameters of painting is to assume that there are still parameters to be pushed, which is arguable. In the helpful brochure, the text of which is an interview with the curators conducted by gallery director Karen Indeck, Bramson states hesitantly that for her the question of an individual work isn't so much whether it's good or has substance, but whether it "grabbed me, fought with me, or compelled me to confront it face-to-face." Likewise, Fish indicates that the terms "successful" and "less successful" are more relevant when talking about individual works than "good" or "not good."

Several locally well-known artists are represented in the show. Susanne Doremus's oil-on-canvas *Airbuilt* proves that painterly abstraction is still a viable option. Her calligraphic skeins of orange, green, purple, and blue paint over a white ground create a dialogue with a ghostly underlayer that leaches through. I think this work is very pretty, rather than beautiful, making it less successful for me. Michelle Grabner's *Rainbow* is a wave of raised pasted dots of flocking that seep across the rectangular canvas. The seductive beauty of this piece is unquestionable, but its suggestion of the familiar and domestic in its format and use of materials and colors transports it to a more complex conceptual level. Its patterning is made with the help of an ordinary cotton blanket. The exhibit takes its title from Walter Anderson's contribution *It Looks Easy*. A very small acrylic on canvas, it represents the artist's familiar strategy of using a white

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ground with painted text surrounded by a kind of *trompe l'oeil* frame. The words of the title form the text, which refers not only to the act of painting and the possibility of making a picture, but also to the linguistic nature of art.

Two pieces in the show especially stand out for me: Mark Otten's unlikely *Pickle Tickled*, and Shona Macdonald's *180 Envelope Innards*. The Otten painting is repellent at first—its colors harsh and its meaning obscure—but its goofy charm is insinuating. Who can resist a meandering structure of sticker-like cartoon images painted over an acid-green ground, while textured disks protrude through the surface? Not me. The title of Macdonald's work is literal. This "painting" consists of thin strips cut from the insides of envelopes and layered horizontally on the canvas. The diversity of designs of the envelopes is remarkable, and the whole appears as a richly embroidered cloth, quilt, or some kind of needlework.

"It Looks Easy" succeeds as a kind of educational seminar on the variety of contemporary painting practices. This variety is summed up in the curators' adroit placement of Sue Scott's *Pinch*, several pieces of red and pink vinyl tape stuck on the wall, next to Donald MacFadyen's oil-on-panel *Gamble Shed*, an interior film-noir scene as realistically rendered as possible. This show is proof that in as much as painting is an unresolved issue, it is still a valid endeavor, able to adapt to an endless variety of uses.

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Shona Macdonald  
*180 Envelope Innards* (detail), 1997-99, from "It Looks Easy."  
 Envelopes and acrylic polymer emulsion, 33" x 72".  
 Courtesy of Gallery 400 and the artist.

