

## Juror's Comments

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Though the practice of painting goes back some 35,000 years, to the caves of Sulawesi in Indonesia, it has greatly evolved through the centuries. Despite its developments, painting has continually reflected aspects of the human condition, the medium's practitioners, and the cultural contexts in which the works were produced. While painting is an omnipresent and steadfast medium, there have been times, such as with the advent of photography in the late nineteenth century, when its future was uncertain. With photography's ability to easily and accurately record portraits, for example (although not without its own artistic licenses or subjectivities), many believed the technology would eventually replace painting. Later, in America in the 1960s, Ad Reinhardt claimed that with his black-on-black paintings he was "making the last paintings which anyone can make," and with this he, like many other artists, attempted to usher in the death of the medium.<sup>1</sup> According to the formalist ideologies of the influential postwar art critics Clement Greenberg and Alfred Barr, the nearly century-long history of modernist painting was merely a path leading up to medium self-sufficiency, with the monochrome field or the

grid acting as painting's grand finale.<sup>2</sup> When it seemed that formalist abstraction's essentializing storyline had reached its predicted conclusion, many artists in the 1960s began turning to other media and practices.<sup>3</sup>

Although artists and critics were mistaken in declaring the death of painting in the 1960s, its health is still questioned today.<sup>4</sup> Despite this, painters ceaselessly prove that their practice is alive and well, that there is always familiar and unfamiliar territory to adapt and traverse. Real-life events and technology, such as photography, have become symbiotic with painting, pushing artists to explore new topics and techniques while reflecting the time in which the work was made: with photographic reproduction and mass advertising came Andy Warhol's screenprinted canvases, and with the Internet, Laura Owens's large-scale experimental paintings.

So, what exactly constitutes a new American painting today? There is no singular answer, style, or subject to pinpoint, and it feels reductive to do so. The diversity of contemporary painting follows the trajectory of postmodernism in the 1980s, when figurative and abstract painters alike were bucking the essentializing character of formalist abstraction that had dominated American art in the early to mid-twentieth century. The saturation of media, advertisements, and the news cycle accelerated in the '80s, and has reached an all-time fever pitch today, providing fodder for artists in all media. The '80s were a charged decade politically and economically in America, and with the rise of video and installation art, as well as alternative spaces, the established narrative of painting was undone in favor of many different interpretations of what painting could or should be, essentially opening up possibilities for painters to follow in the decades to come.

<sup>1</sup> Ad Reinhardt, 1966, quoted in Lucy Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981), 158.

<sup>2</sup> Johanna Drucker, *Theorizing Modernism: Visual Art and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 61.



Bauer p18



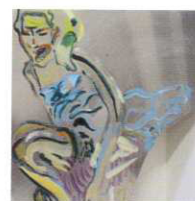
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## “Despite its developments, painting has continually reflected aspects of the human condition, the medium’s practitioners, and the cultural contexts in which the works were produced.”

As you’ll see throughout this issue of *New American Paintings*, no single genre, style, or subject matter emerges as a front-runner. This diversity reflects the artists’ varied places of origin, whether China, Mexico, South Korea, New Jersey, New York, Texas, or Utah. It also results from the artists’ broad influences and interests, the complicated facets of contemporary life, and the overall encompassing nature of painting today. Abstraction figures prominently in this issue, including Kristin Bauer’s graphic panels that conflate text into indiscernible forms, suggesting the abstract nature of language itself. Innovative materials are also presented: Keer Tanchak’s sculptural paintings on aluminum hover between painting and object, while the economical nature of aluminum cleverly contradicts the well-dressed rococo figures painted on the surface, raising questions on wealth and class. Many figurative paintings appear as well, as in works by Byron Anway, Matthew Bourbon, Katy Horan, Jasmine Little, and Mitch Mantle. Narratives are being told, as in *The Remains* by Xi Zhang, where a lone figure sits in the back of an empty bus scattered with empty pairs of shoes that, despite the work’s vibrant palette, imparts the psychological weight of desolation.

Many stories reflecting America today are also related in these pages: Papay Solomon’s deft photorealistic portraits, such as *Diluting Dreams*, *Portrait of Allesene Ntwali*, depict young African immigrants in the United States. Solomon’s paintings communicate the humanity of the sitters, and are especially powerful in light of the current political climate, often hostile to DREAMers and immigrants. Another intriguing exploration of traditional portraiture is the work of

Shawn Huckins, who copies canvases in the White House Art Collection, albeit in various states of erasure—the expunged areas of the sourced paintings are replaced with the gray-and-white checkerboard pattern of Adobe Photoshop. Huckins’s work suggests that formerly foundational American ideals are now quickly being eradicated, while at the same time his paintings playfully merge current technologies with art-historical precedents. Hollis Hammonds’s *Charlotte Riots #1* depicts the 2016 event in a stark black-and-white palette, testifying that this particularly ugly chapter of contemporary American history will not, and should not, be forgotten. The large-scale murals by Xavier Schipani depict flattened, abstracted male figures engaged in sexual acts, and are set in installations resembling restroom stalls. Schipani transforms these hotly debated places—public restrooms—into safe spaces, illustrating celebratory doings while raising questions on masculinity, gender, and sexuality.

With so many stories to tell right now, artists—as they always have and always will—shine a light on the world in which we live. Painters will continue to test the bounds of the medium and explore its formal history, and, like those who came before, will provide beauty, solace, critique, and escape in trying times. ■

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Crimp, “The End of Painting,” in Frances Colpitt, ed., *Abstract Art in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 96.

First published in *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 69–86.

<sup>4</sup> See Jason Farago, “Is Painting Dead?” BBC.com, February 18, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150217-is-painting-dead>.



Xi Zhang

Toy Story | acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches



Xi Zhang

The Remains | acrylic and oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches



Xi Zhang

The Sunday Dusk | acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 inches