

One day, years ago when I was an undergraduate painting student, I was talking with a much-loved professor, a painter of tidy still life paintings in which he made an interesting and curious remark: “If I could paint any way other than the way I do, I’d paint like Frank Auerbach,” surprisingly naming a 20th century artist known for messy, thickly impastoed portraits and landscapes. At that point, with me struggling to make any meaningful use of paint at all, this struck me as an odd thing for someone I admired to say. It seems less so now. It seems reasonable to wonder, does there exist for every artist a natural way to use the materials in order to make an authentic expression? Or should one simply have a good idea for painting and go to it, unconcerned with personal habits and tendencies? Is there a useful difference between who I am and what I make on the one hand, and who I could be, what I could make, on the other?

This point might be a useful place to start thinking about the artists in *Crosscurrents in Contemporary Abstraction*, artists who might look at that last question, and answer that no, there is not a useful difference and one can be both natural in one’s working and making, and also make extensive use of any stratagem coming from outside of those natural tendencies. This is the quality I see as intriguingly unique about the work of these seven artists. Each displays real comfort with duality, an ability to make artwork that embraces both sides of the various divides, opposing constructs and either/or propositions that artists, historians and philosophers tussle over.

This acceptance of duality is something contemporary artists actually talk quite a lot about. One artist tells me about thinking about paintings as objects and as illusions, that the painting is something and it’s about something. Linnea Spransy writes about making rules for her practice or, favoring a more scientific language, a series of controls, and improvising within these controls. Spransy and other artists speak of using both intentional and arbitrary mark making. Katherine Bradford has stated that she sees balancing the formal and the narrative elements of her paintings as an act of conceptual juggling. Jennifer Moses uses the hybrid word “tragicomic” to describe the effect of her paintings.

Another dualism always worth talking about is the division between intellect and feeling, and I am interested in something the artist Agnes Martin had to say about it, from an essay titled “Beauty is the Mystery of Art”: “It is quite commonly thought that the intellect is responsible for everything that is made and done. It is commonly thought that everything that is can be put into words.” But Martin comes from an era comfortable with absolutes. Artists and other thinking persons, faced with opposing conditions, had to choose one over the other, as Martin does when she goes on to write in the next paragraph, “Our emotional life is really dominant over our intellectual life, but we do not realize it.” I find difficult to imagine that any of the artists in this exhibit would be willing to accept the notion that either side of our experience—the emotional or the intellectual—truly dominates the other.

There are ways that paintings do address the intellect. There may be an aspect of a painting that triggers some idea of a story. In paintings, story does not mean image alone, with a good guy and a bad guy and someone moving from one place to another. It can be a story of the artist making decisions and actions in the studio, performing the painting. It can be a story about progress in art, if the work takes part in some evolution of the taste and value. It can be a story about the object itself, accumulating layers during its time in the painter’s studio, fascinating in the way a much-graffiti’d urban overpass is fascinating, or a medieval manuscript scraped clean and used over and over (from which comes a word with many contemporary applications, the term “palimpsest” is used to describe any object that visibly reveals its own history, and it is a quality that several of the artists in this exhibit cultivate in their work).

It’s useful to remember that—outside of an art gallery—abstract concepts are any commonly accepted ideas not related to a specific instance or object. Justice, Charity, Courage, Innocence, Balance—I

cannot see them, cannot sniff them, cannot touch them, but I am much, much happier believing I live in a universe where these exist. Frequently, Abstract Art is an attempt to address these and other, subtler concepts like the sublime, the uncanny, the bittersweet, or the aforementioned tragicomic without relying on recognizable imagery, which artists know involves a lot of distracting association.

On the other side of the divide, there are ways paintings address the emotions, intuition or even the physical body. Paintings have a physical size, shape, color, value and texture, and these attributes produce illusions of depth and movement, can attract or repel, can make us feel balanced or off-balance, larger, smaller, warmer, cooler, near, far, calm or agitated, familiar or strange. Corey Antis writes of his works as “reminders of scale” and about engaging with a subjective experience of proposed sights, structures and objects. Other artists find color is an especially powerful element. For Jill Nathanson, color exists simultaneously as both energy and matter. Hannah Barnes calls it seductive and strange, optical and performative.

Add to that list another useful pair of opposing concepts, known and unknown. In the essay “Visions Resistance to Language”, painter and critic Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe suggests another way that the visual in art affects us. He writes, “I should like to propose that sight knows only surprise and recognition. One either sees something one has seen before or one does not.” Linnea Spransy writes in her artist’s statement specifically about both rules and surprise. Antis, Barnes, Bradford and Dan Sutherland often make use of simple or common forms made surprising through abbreviation, juxtaposition and obsessive re-statement.

To anyone who might at this point still find themselves unable to find the purpose or value of abstract painting in general, I recommend reading Thomas McEvilley’s essay “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”. McEvilley, writing with feeling and intellect, gives readers that many ways of looking at and finding content in art—scale, material, temporal duration, from social or political context, from its relationship to art history, etc. It is a list that applies to all sorts of art, contemporary, historical, representational, abstract, naïve, highly conceptual and on and on, and everything in between. Thirteen ways of looking at art might come in handy right now, viewing paintings mostly lacking in representational images. The purpose or the content of these works is not immediately apparent. The viewer is asked to find content. Finding content, I think, can mean finding value and finding value can mean finding reasons to look at and be inspired by art.

In his conclusion, McEvilley writes this: “A work that *features* contradictions among its levels of content thereby gains yet another level [of content] involving concepts like paradox, inner struggle, tension and negation of meaning process. “ That is a list of attributes that sounds unquestionably exciting—words to describe an award-winning film actor’s performance rather than an abstract painting. Note however, that some of these same words turn up in statements by Jennifer Moses and Dan Sutherland.

Now, if I could write in any way other than the way I do, I might be inspired by McEvilley’s idea of overlapping and interpenetrating layers of content to make a scholarly, philosophical conclusion. I think there might be an argument that, in their eager embrace of dualisms, these artists might be searching for some post-dualistic approach to art-making, maybe a metaphor for a contemporary open and flexible worldview. Being the writer I am, I prefer to simply suggest an approach to looking at this art—really looking smartly at it: what sorts of those divides, opposing states and either/or propositions exist in these paintings? I wish to leave you with at least one clue, only a starting point: a short poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, “Archaic Torso of Apollo”. Present in Rilke’s loving look at a particular Greek sculpture are the known and the unknown, the possessed and the lost, original intent and accumulated significant, power and weakness, perfection and disfigurement, an awareness of the object itself and the long, long

narrative is possesses. There might be in that list a good place to start looking at these paintings by Corey Antis, Hannah Barnes, Katherine Bradford, Jennifer Moses, Jill Nathanson, Linnea Spransy and Dan Sutherland.

*We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,*

*gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.*

*Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
Beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
And would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:*

*Would not, from all the borders of itself,
Burst like a star: for here there is no place
That does not see you. You must change your life.*