

artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

CRITICISM ► EXHIBITIONS

Saturday, October 1st, 2005

Extreme Abstraction

by Joan Boykoff Baron and Reuben M. Baron

The Albright-Knox Art Gallery

1285 Elmwood Ave.z

Buffalo, NY 14222



artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

CRITICISM ► EXHIBITIONS

Saturday, October 1st, 2005

Extreme Abstraction

by Joan Boykoff Baron and Reuben M. Baron

The Albright-Knox Art Gallery

1285 Elmwood Ave.z

Buffalo, NY 14222

316-882-8700

July 15 – October 2, 2005



Installation shots are by the author. From left to right: Katharina Grosse (Untitled, 2004); Liz Larner (2001, 2001); David Reed (#515, 2001-2004)

This lively exhibition at the Albright-Knox Museum is about connections and dialogues and more broadly about how to buildbuilding bridges. The connections do more than demonstrate relationships between works within this exhibition or between this exhibition and past exhibitions curated by the museum's new director, Louis Grachos. These connections are bridges to the past, to the present, and to the future. They open up new possibilities for audiences to appreciate good art that do not presently exist.

If this is not the best possible survey of contemporary abstract art that could be put together, and it is not, it is certainly strong enough and unique enough to be well worth a visit to the Albright-Knox. Indeed, some of the reasons why this could not be a more representative exhibition of contemporary abstraction, are part of its strengths. Dating back to the beginning of the 20th century, the Albright-Knox was one of the first museums to collect abstract art and today, the museum's collection is approximately 60 percent abstract. At issue here is a valiant attempt of the museum's curatorial staff to juxtapose its legacy of abstract masters with current abstract art that is not limited to painting. Extreme Abstraction reflects a predilection to showcase works that are experiments in materials, color, form, and media (video, computer-based art) as well as various new venues for abstract art—floors, steps, and outside walls. The result is that the more than 150 works selected for this show enable the past to reframe the present and the present to reframe the past.

In the words of David Pagel, these are mostly examples of "hands off" art that eschew the use of a brush to apply conventional paint (oil or acrylic) to canvas. Hot art is compared to cool art. The basic dialogue then is between this newer art and the museum's very strong, albeit not complete, permanent collection of abstract art beginning with Malevich, Rodchenko, and Mondrian, and then journeying through Abstract Expressionism, Optical and Kinetic Art, Color Field and Minimalism. Here, masters include: New York School painters Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, Clifford Still, Mark Rothko, Franz Kline, Wilhelm deKooning, Hans Hofmann and Ad Reinhardt; Color Field painters such as Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, and minimalists of varying sorts—Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Sol Lewitt, Elsworth Kelly, and Agnes Martin. It is noteworthy that the permanent collection is so strong that one has to work hard to find omissions like Barnett Newman, Robert Ryman and Brice Marden. But then again Morris Louis and Richard Serra are present as bookends between the end of Abstract Expressionism and the rise of Minimalism. Here, an Eva Hesse would have been welcome but there is a strong Lynda Benglis floor piece. There are also two excellent examples of the Light and Space Movement

—Craig Kauffman and Robert Irwin. The Bengalis and Kauffman are particularly important because they represent direct antecedents to the contemporary extreme abstractions in regard to the use of quirky, industrial materials and colors, as well as blurring the line between painting and sculpture. They portend the delightful impurity of the Extreme Abstraction sensibility by exchanging extroversion for introversion, affirmative emotions such as joy and playfulness for angst, and substituting a garden of earthly delights for high-minded ideals. And most telling, such artists produce art that is perhaps more expressive of the materials they use than their own personal struggles to wrest meaning out of the void.



Bottom left: Polly Apfelbaum (Reckless, 1998); Top center: Jackson Pollock (Convergence, 1952)



Right: Sol Lewitt, "3-B Half Off Piece" 1971; Center Linda Besemer, "Fold #80" 2005; Right: Donald Judd, "Untitled", 1969

The installations here are crucial. For example, a powerful Jackson Pollock, "Convergence" (1952), is paired with a floor piece, "Reckless" (1998) by Polly Apfelbaum, which is an assemblage of individually cut pieces of synthetic stretch velvet, fabric and dye. Such dialogues are multifaceted. At certain formal levels the works are similar—they both show all-over abstraction and they are both floor pieces albeit in different ways. Apfelbaum's is a floor piece in terms of the installation and Pollock's in terms of how the work was painted. But they are also profoundly different in ways central to today's Post-Modern abstraction. The Apfelbaum and related works in the exhibition such as Linda Besemer's Fold painting, consisting of a sheet of pure acrylic paint draped over a bar, have a feminist agenda; they, along with Lynda Benglis' "Fallen Painting" (1968) which is a floor piece of pigmented latex rubber, demonstrate that women's work can give rise to "high art". Specifically, such works are "crafted", not painted on canvas, playful rather than driven. There is, however, a deeper connection that needs to be explored. Pollock, Apfelbaum, Besemer and Benglis create art that, in the terms Robert Smithson (1965) used to describe Donald Judd, have an "uncanny materiality". How these works were created and how they need to be viewed are transformed by the expressive materials used. Such art encourages a viewer to look at Jackson Pollock differently. Pollock's style of working, in regard to his throwing and dripping paint as he danced around a canvas, created art that is best seen in an active, embodied way. Michael Fried notwithstanding, theatricality in abstract art is born here with Pollock, not with Judd's minimalism. The scale, surface tactility, and complexity of pattern invite the viewer to complete the work by moving close to it and walking from side to side. This is also true of Apfelbaum's and Benglis' floor pieces.

A major strength of this exhibition is that works do more than enhance one another—they have a synergistic effect. Another interesting form of connection or dialogue is how the museum's installation allows different works to enrich the meaning of works in the same visual space. John Armleder, for example, uses in his own work to key an installation of Op and Kinetic art he curated from the museum's permanent collection. The installation newer work, especially coupled with a video by Jennifer Steinbcamp makes the older art seem fresh, exciting and contemporary in feeling, and not so distant from cousin to Leo Villareal's monumental outdoor light piece. Although Villareal's mechanisms are extremely different being based on computer software and LED lights, his work in this context becomes a contemporary descendent of Op and Kinetic art. Then there is a wonderful dialogue among works from different artists and different periods all of which turn color into lava-like flow fields. What other exhibition comes to mind that would encourage us to see similarities among the work of Clifford Still, Morris Louis, Lynda Benglis and Ingrid Calame?

There is also a productive visual dialogue between David Reed's exuberant vertical painting of brushstrokes that playfully twist and turn and fold and unfold and a massive sculptural piece that shares many of these attributes by Liz Larner. Here, blues, greens, reds, yellows, and purples speak to each other across a broad visual field, thereby giving a dynamic, contemporary twist to Albers' color contextualism, this time across media. The Reed and Larner works also share a kind of tawdry sensuality of form and color and both require an active, embodied viewer since they change from different distances and viewing stations. Further, they are neither organic nor inorganic, but trapped between these worlds (Larner's sculpture could be seen as an alien space ship.)



From bottom left clockwise: Lynda Benglis (Fallen Painting, 1968); Ingrid Calame (Secular Response 2A.J., 2003); Damien Hurst (Beautiful, Insane, Insensitive, Erupting Liquid Ice, 1995); Jim Lambie (Plaza, 2005); Clifford Still (October 1950, 1950); Morris Louis (Alpha, 1960)

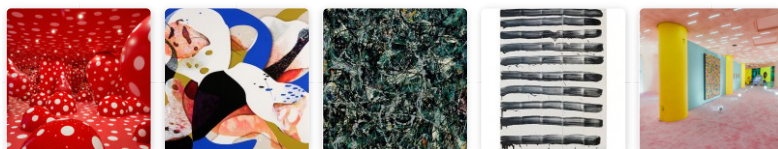
The exhibition also reflects a hidden connection across time and space with a previous show that involved Louis Grachos, the new Director of the Albright-Knox Museum. Specifically, his earlier curation at Site Santa Fe of an exhibition entitled, *Postmark: An Abstract Effect* (1999) included thirteen artists more than a dozen artists that are in the present show. This suggests it appears that the seeds of at least certain aspects of Extreme Abstraction were planted in Postmark's exhibition of "hands off" abstraction—work informed by the movies, TV, computer screens and automobiles. These abstractions captured a world in which the boundaries between high art and low art are blurred if not obliterated. In this connection (pun intended) Extreme Abstraction's placing of a Flavin light sculpture across the room from David Batchelor's "Idiot Stick" is illustrative. Specifically, this exhibition, as did Postmark, celebrates the impurity of a current abstraction that is often more decorative than spiritual. The impurity also extends to the inclusion in the current exhibition of photographic and video forms of abstraction including the photographic material of Adam Fuss and Gregory Kucera and the videos of Jeremy Blake and Jennifer Steincamp, the latter of which dialogues so beautifully with the large Armeleder light piece

. There is also an interesting connection albeit a much lower degree of overlap between the Albright Knox's previous exhibition, *The Forman Collection of Monochrome Art*, which although it included some nontraditional materials like Florence Pierce's resin pieces which were also in the PostMark exhibit but did not make it into this one. This is unfortunate because Pierce's work is an interesting hybrid. It has an affinity to Agnes Martin's transcendental minimalism while at the same time being much a creature of the expressive industrial material it uses, a subtheme of the present exhibition.

There is also what is likely to be an unintended but we find fascinating connection between several works in this exhibition and a classic surrealist painting by Salvador Dali, *The Persistence of Time*. In Dali's work, the line between inorganic and organic objects is blurred, time pieces flow and drip, losing their rigid boundaries. Interestingly, there are a number of works in this exhibition that have a kind of flowing, bendy, drippy kind of quality that threaten their integrity as solid objects. These include works as diverse as Apfulbaum, Pollock, Besemer, Reed, Zimmerman, Yamaoke, Grosse and Davie. This affinity group suggests that at least for a subgroup of artists in the Extreme Abstraction exhibition, there is a kind of meta-impurity, what might be termed surrealist abstraction.

Finally, the museum and especially its director are to be congratulated for initiating an exhibition program, starting with the Forman Collection this spring, that departs from the current rage for a kind of decadent figuration reminiscent of Klimt and Schiele. Instead The Albright-Knox is offering us a virtual library laboratory for the study of abstraction in its many forms. Taken together with Grachos' earlier *Postmark* exhibition at Site Santa Fe, we have a demonstration these three exhibitions demonstrate that the death of abstract art has been greatly exaggerated. Abstraction has once again morphed. It has changed its material, form and aesthetic sensibility, thereby making it an ever more elusive target for the its would-be executioners of abstraction. Indeed its arch-enemy, Post-Modernism, has now been assimilated into it. Abstraction is dead; long live Abstraction.

More from artcritical



The Garage
Arrives: Report from a New Museum

Oil as Water:
POUR at Lesley Heller and Asya Geisberg

Abstract
Expressionism and the American Experience

Clarity of Fracture:
David Reed, 1975 at Gagolian

Total Work of Art:
"Spaced Out" at Red Bull Studios