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Paint it cool

Linda Besemer

By [Kris Vagner](#)

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In Linda Besemer's paintings, there's no person, no landscape, no vase of flowers. There's no background, no foreground, and they look nothing like the abstractions of Pollock, Picasso or Rothko.

There's not even a canvas. Just paint. Neatly cut sheets of acrylic hanging over a sleek, metal rod, or paint layered so many inches thick it takes two years to form and dry. Those pieces look like smooth, wood wall sculptures.

They seem to shout joyously, "Who needs to play by the old rules of painting?"

But the old rules of painting are deeply entrenched, and extricating yourself from them is no piece of cake.

Talking by phone from her office at Occidental College in Los Angeles, where she's a professor of art and also gender studies, Besemer told the backstory of her work.

In 1983, when she finished grad school in Philadelphia, she says, "Painting had been declared dead many, many times.

"In the '70s and '80s painting got a double whammy," she says. It was criticized for being generally "loaded, outdated and anachronistic." At the same time, feminist theorists attacked the medium, claiming, "abstraction was the distillation of all the misogyny you could find."

Often, paintings are meant to create desire. "When we talk about painting and about the construction of desire, it's always from a male point of view," Besemer says.

Think about the historic paintings you've seen. In them, men are usually upright and dignified; women are very often reclining or looking away or generally looking desirable. The women are in the picture so you can want them. The men are in the picture so you can want to be them. Either way, a male viewpoint is assumed. Usually a wealthy, white one, Besemer adds.

Even though they're made of just paint and canvas, paintings signify human postures and gestures, statuses and desires, loudly and clearly.

"I wanted to detach from that," Besemer says. "If it really was just paint, how could it embody all this historical meaning? And if it did, how could I change it?"

She aimed to find a new way to construct a painting. She began by making single brushstrokes on plastic, peeling them off, and hanging them on the wall with Velcro. No one else she knew was making that kind of painting. If you really wanted to be current, you'd be more likely to find kindred spirits in other disciplines such as sculpture or photography.

"Initially I got kind of a bad reception, especially the detachable brush strokes," she says. She kept working.

"It took 15 years, but I feel vindicated now," she says. Her work was showcased in the 2000 Whitney Biennial.

While these paintings without a surface make a serious statement about painting, motivated by Besemer's observations on gender politics, they're also joyous, bright, delicious eye candy. The lines swoop and move right at you, and the tricky optics are so satisfying that whatever desire they may create, they instantly fulfill.

Besemer says she's comfortable with both the feminist reconstruction point of view and the yummy eye-candy point of view. In fact, she has a good story about that. On the way to one of her first exhibits, in a little-known, second-floor gallery in New York City, she asked the elevator operator if he'd seen the show.

"He said, 'I liked the green one.' Then a critic came in and wrote about the green one and put it into all these academic contexts. What I thought was still interesting about painting was that it can still transcend language. I was fascinated about the way it could communicate across these barricades between us."



"Sine Language" New Works by Linda Besemer are on display at the Nevada Museum of Art