



Cinco continentes y una ciudad

Five continents and one city

Abstraction In Context: A Modest Proposal

Over the past two decades there has been a paradigm shift in understanding art. By today it is widely acknowledged that a large intellectual and artistic shift has taken place, one which might loosely be called an aesthetics of context, or contextual aesthetics. This shift, in general terms, recognized, among other things, that the initial hopes for modernism were over-inflated. Importantly, for this exhibition, there was also the recognition that "abstraction" as an emblem of modernism had itself become a pedagogic apparatus to conservative institutional goals. By this, I mean that abstraction was superseded in its primary role as a source of surprising vision and modern means to graphically emphasize change (to society or to aesthetics or just to style). It seemed to now have a lesser and supporting role, even to the extent of being an institutional cliché, no different from the traditional art of academies that it had sought so rigorously to separate itself from in the earlier part of the century. A piece of abstract welded steel sculpture sitting in front of a building, whether corporate or public, (sometimes known as plop art) became the archetypal emblem of a defeated optimism and reduced expectations everywhere.

Embraced by corporations worldwide and absorbed wholeheartedly into the institutions it meant to alter or even becoming their very collectible cornerstone, abstraction as a rhetoric of modern breakthroughs and progress eventually produced its own *cul de sac*. Abstraction's monastic obeisance to formalisms and material constraints of each of its mediums had ultimately produced a kind of weakened readymade aesthetic of production and reception. Abstraction was a pictorial revolution now all dressed up with the same place to go every night — a standard-bearer for past revolutions and past advances and past powers. The strong and vital modernist impulse toward personal and social discovery that was abstraction had become a rearguard tradition maintained and insulated by the very conservative academic and museological institutions which were its original targets of enmity. By 1989, abstract art was seen by a younger generation of artists as a romantic yearning or nostalgia for bygone days and its sincere adherents had a pious and pretentious cast about them.

But, slowly, some of this same generation of artists have taken up abstraction again, albeit with differences. Investigating the contradictions that can now be seen in the earlier rhetoric of modernist monotheism, these younger artists are concerned with what can still be wrung from these forms and how the ideas can be extended. They are also cognizant that to do so is to engage with another almost monolithic and newer rhetoric which claims that not only

abstraction is exhausted, so are its material forms like painting and sculpture. There is much of this "paper enemy" spirit which guides Biennale curators, particularly, in attempting to justify the widespread extinction of painting *per se*, for instance. But, I have chosen three artists to represent "painting" from North America (in its always contaminated and, now, besieged form) because I, like them, are not convinced that video and photography and installation art have "replaced" traditional forms of expression. For Linda Besemer, Graham Gillmore and Robert Youds, I suspect, that those new arguments for new art unfortunately sound just like the old ones — moral and ideological judgments couched in the guise of a technophilic and museological aesthetic progress. But, today, fortunately for us who believe in democracy, is a time when all expressive forms can finally be considered equal at the level of choice (which is often economically determined) and it is only the effectivity of any art which is important. Its allegiances are always a matter of context as well. So, the question of which is better or worse, *per se*, we now know to be a question of power, not of communication. This is one of the real lessons we can learn from modernism which should shame cultural critics from making the same mistakes as their predecessors.

For Besemer, Gilmore and Youds, abstraction today exists in the interstices left behind by the great ice age of modernism — in the "cracks", where as Leonard Cohen sings, "the light gets in". Recent critical thinking has made us acutely aware that despite the individual and institutional hopes for a universal visual language which underwrote abstract art's earliest claims, modernist work now serves to remind us of all sorts of exclusions. An abstract work from the first half of the century or longer is aligned with values such as urban over rural, male over female, grand rather than minor, revolutionary rather than evolutionary, metaphysical rather than physical, important rather than decorative and so on. In other words, abstraction was actually particular in the extreme and not at all universal. It was, at best, a dialect rather than a language. These efforts might have been earnest and well-informed at the time, or naïve and hyperbolic, but the *leitmotif* of abstract art clearly formed a highly selective and exclusive portrait of the modern world, the modern person, and the modern environment. An abstract work was in fact another kind of representation, a representation of a certain set of beliefs embedded in a certain set of ideologies — a certain fundamentalism. And the emphasis here is on the word certain.

But when the word representation crops up, we are shunted into the contemporary world of understanding again. We know clearly, and it's part of what abstraction thought it reacted against, that a mimetic representation acts as an icon, analogous to what it represents. The image of a horse has some kind of relation to an actual horse, for instance. But we also know that relation of vision is culturally coded, that a mimetic representation depends upon some degree of abstracting to be understood and this "abstracting" varies from culture to culture. As a symbolic construction of the "real", just like language, a figurative picture depends upon a full complement of arbitrary cultural traditions to make itself understood. But, and this is what is more widely understood today, abstract pictures too similarly depend on some "real" referent outside themselves to be decipherable. An abstract picture is incomprehensible as having cultural import without a context. A concept like the "sublime", which already exists in language has to be applied as a referent for an abstract mode to communicate. The psychological concept of "angst" must exist before being applied as an analogy for Expressionist work or the concept of "alienation" or "freedom" before being applied to any form of abstraction. Or concepts of "order" and "rationality" or "balance" are known before being associated with the geometric forms in some abstract work. In other words, if figurative pictures are analogies, abstract pictures are metaphors, however ambiguous.

What this means simply is that abstract works are also mimetic to the degree that they have references or are contextualized by other discourses and codes (they are related to something conceptual like "horse sense" rather than to an object like "horse"). This is the contradiction which always existed in earlier abstraction and which is now being exploited by the artists here. The idea that an abstract work represented something is not new, of course. As Joan Simon pointed out, its references were always numerous: "political, spiritual, mathematical, architectural, organic, narrative, figurative and so on". From the very beginnings, an abstract work was meant to represent something but something vague, like a feeling or a spirituality or a profundity like the sublime or the beautiful or the revolutionary. Representational images were derided for being illustrative of something else which was more literal. But despite the understanding that abstraction was also representing (re-presenting), it was thought to be more autonomous and an more independent expression and that it was also somehow, even, "non-referential". Abstract pictures were abstracted from something else, nature or the

real world, to present a new condition which was its essence but not its translation. And this is perhaps why both forms of representation have claimed "realism" as their own at different moments.

Today, in a media saturated world, abstract art by Besemer, Gillmore and Youds, might be said to be preoccupied or even compelled by a huge number of references, including, abstract art. The kind of abstraction proposed by these three North American artists then is not in opposition to other art, but is rather an extension of it and an embrace of its contradictions, ellipses and aporia. The rolled paintings of Besemer, the language introductions of Gillmore and the wry commentaries of Youd's "last" paintings and mall-Mondrian constructions are like a shadow of earlier abstraction. They deliberately ghost modernism's purity by producing its unconsciousness: they produce its allegiance to decoration, to language and to philosophical extremes. Besemer, Gillmore and Youds even mock earlier work in abstraction as a kind of doppelganger without becoming nonsensical. They understand their status is no longer that of a historical engine of revolutionary change but that perhaps of evolutionary development.

Earlier abstract art is now, to them, a generic visual commodity, culturally available and understandable to all, its metaphysics an endangered species. Abstract art appears in movies, fashion shows, museums and cartoons as a symbol of a time and an attitude (or a retro versioning which is always ironic). It is possible to say that abstraction is now a "readymade", like Marcel Duchamp's shovel, an off-the-shelf commodity with a certain flair and a limited function. Artists today take abstraction as one source among many of available designs, colors, systems of expression, images and other possibilities while admitting to its evacuation of full rhetoric and political associations. They neuter it, contradictorily, to gain full access to its sensuality and its viscosity for their own implications. The work of these three North American "abstractionists" (always now in quotations marks) can approach the whimsical, the humorous and the entertaining in its reuse of the clichés of modernism. As their claims are more modest, the works accessibility increases to the point of user-friendly.

It might be said that abstraction this time round is a slang version of its formal forefathers' universal language. It is an improper patois with local references and specifically small narratives. Questions of abstraction or figuration and the philosophical and political differences between them are less compelling for these three than for earlier artists. Instead, for

Besemer, for example, the question which beleaguered late modernist adherents with regard to a work of art as pure medium is answered (there is no ground, only medium in her new works). But the question is less important, or even irrelevant to her than making a painting which can be hung variously and somewhat casually over a towel bar. It, then, not only looks like a towel (or a tartan or some other textile), but its relation to those vernacular elements is welcomed for their real world associations. This is a physical, not a metaphysical object, after all. Arthur Danto expressed the moment when this accidental "permission" was reluctantly granted when he wrote "Modernism came to an end when the dilemma recognized by {Clement} Greenberg between works of art and mere real objects could no longer be articulated in visual terms".¹

And Graham Gillmore's introduction of language (however *faux* its phonetic spellings) into organic abstract forms relives other modernist repressions as well. Craig Owens successfully argued that language was one of modernism's "repressions". For Owens, the distinctions between the visual arts and other arts which could support modernism's aim of autonomy within each art form's definitions were only made possible by the explicit repression of language and its accompanying terms, like allegory and narrativity. It is to this that Gillmore's "bubbles" of language can refer — the awfulness of the artist having to know the Great Names and Great Literature and Great Philosophies and the anxiety of making decisions about abstract art (when to stop, for instance). Gillmore introduces these unspoken anxieties into the work as a commentary of earlier abstraction and as a confession of his local and subjective fears. Broken down, his language requires the attention an active viewer.

For Youds, its all "almost". The single strands of canvas overfilled with paint, relying on technical support to just even hang on the wall, are suggestive of the exhausted abstraction it refers to and of the "last" painting narrative which underwrote monochromatic painting for almost one hundred years. They are "almost" any and all of these references while being "almost" paintings. They are Newman's "zips" without the surround or the "unnecessary" piece cut off after Greenberg had paid one of his judgmental visits to a studio. And Youd's constructions conjure up Mondrian and Flavin together as well as anyone who has ever used plastic both as art or artifact. These works are both museological placements which echo modern art and wall lamps for the retro-modern home. They are at home it might be said anywhere where a Bessemer painting might hang. In the guest room, for instance.

Clearly questions of philosophical import which gave modernism its stature are less compelling for these artists than the ways in which dialogues between materials and spaces, colors and forms, decoration and emblamaticism, object and reference and the position of the viewer are all established. There is, I think a kind of oscillation in the work of these three North Americans. It swings between amusement and solemnity and there is significance but it is not easily assumed or assured. Earned rather than presumed.

Gender and identity are present as both contemporary issues and as a commentary on their histories in modernism but they are not available on the surface as a standard staple, the way that Biennale and museum theory would want it. Instead they exists implicatively as marginality and peripherality, literal analogies through interpretation rather than advertisements of victimization. Or, it could be said, that the politics of these works is subtle, rather than dramatic and overkillling. The intensity in detail, if anything, is the characteristic ideology of modesty which does exists on the surface for a close reading. The works here, I believe, desire to complete the earlier formalist abstract's work in many ways but they reject its elitism and its idealism. They reject its higher claims in the knowledge that it is the little things that change consciousness. Not only are grand narratives over and always, now, eminently suspicious, but the new for its own sake is here replaced by the nuance.

Bruce W. Ferguson



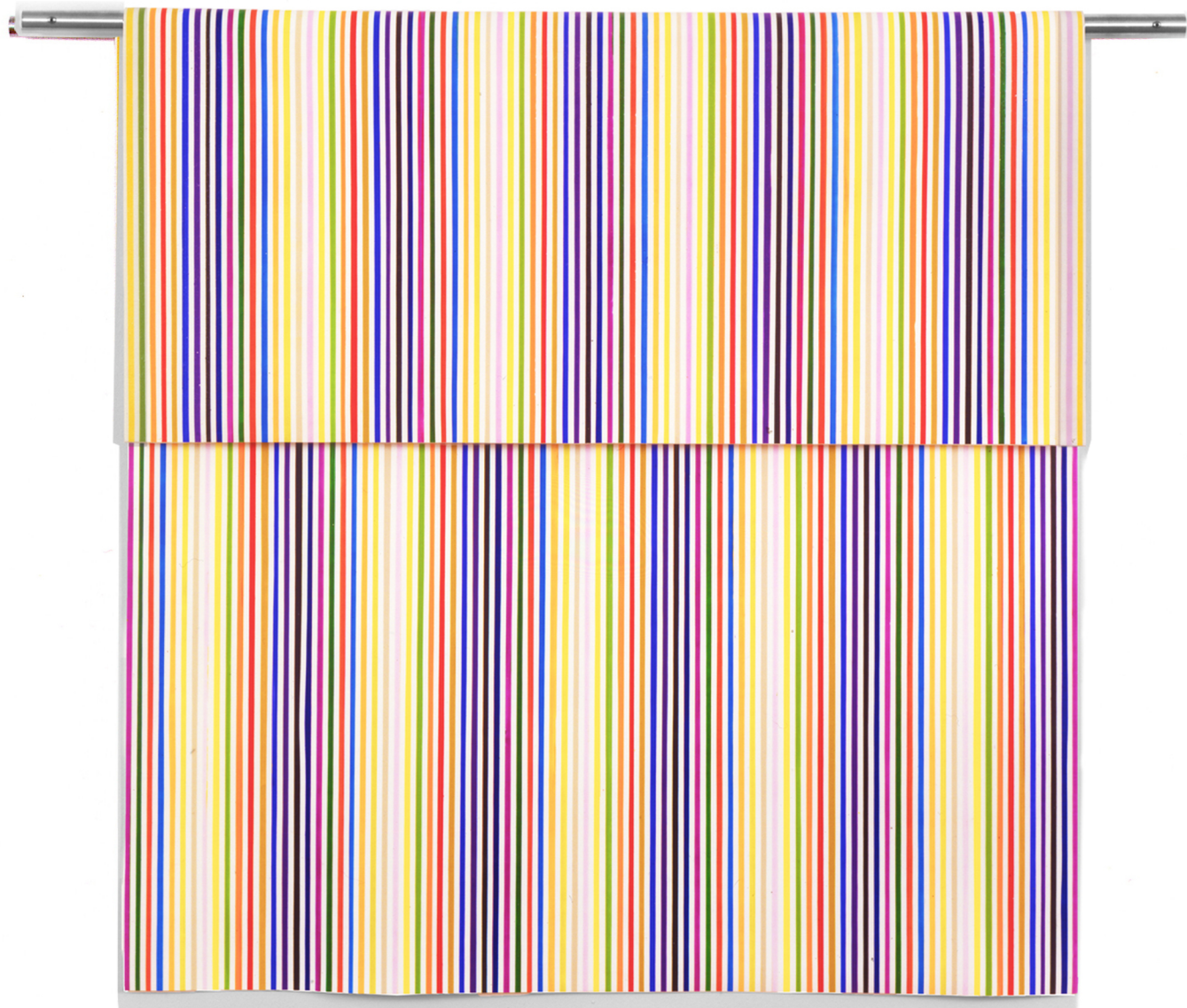
Linda Besemer

ZIP FOLD # I, 1999

Acrílico pintado y enrollado sobre vara de aluminio

117 x 163 cm

Cortesía: Angles Gallery, Santa Monica, CA. Fotógrafo: Brian Forrest



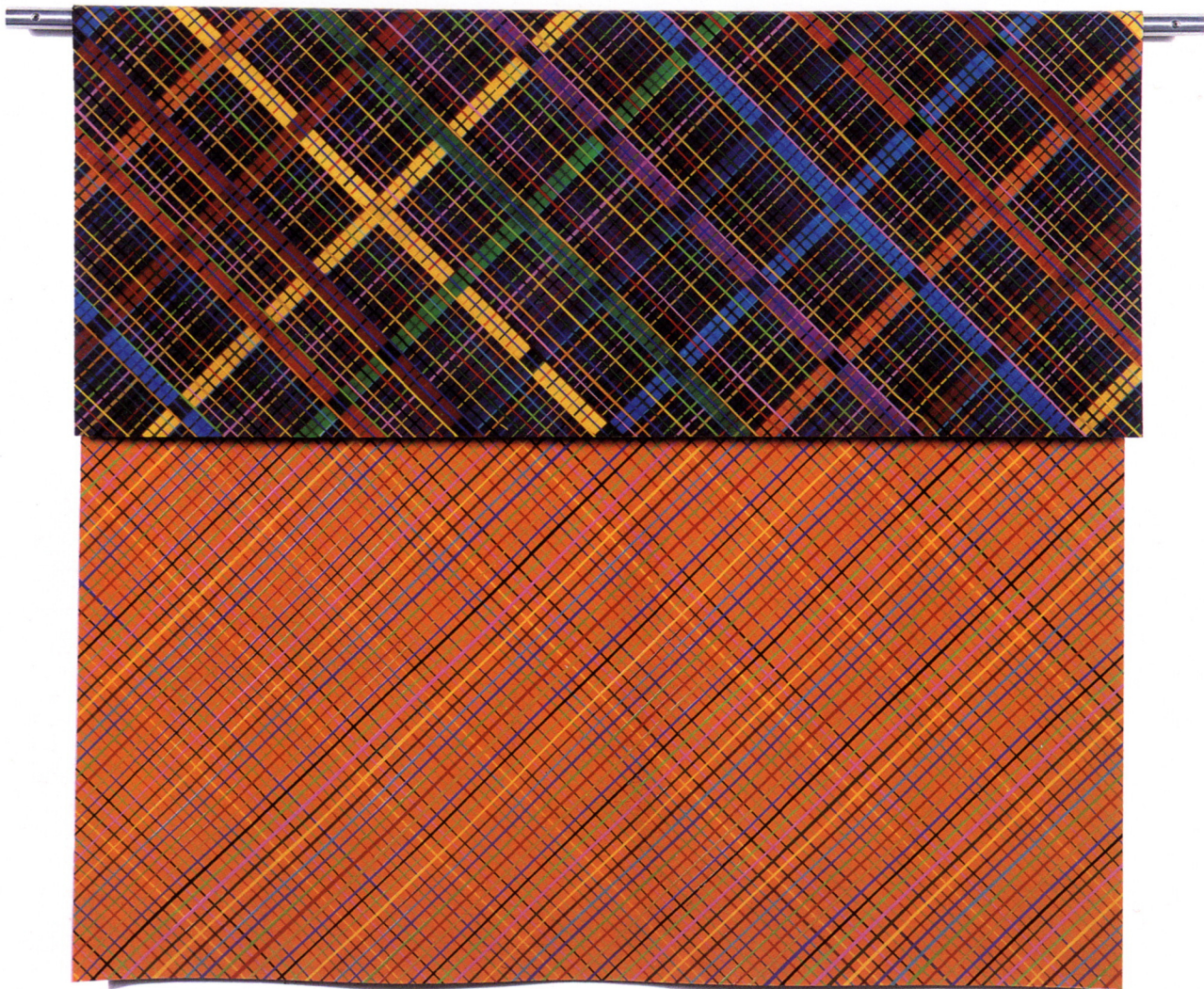
Linda Besemer

FOLD # 16: OPTICAL OBJECTILE # 2, 1999

Acrílico pintado sobre vara de aluminio

112 x 161 cm

Cortesía: Angles Gallery, Santa Monica, CA. Fotógrafo: Brian Forrest



Linda Besemer

FOLD # 14: OPTICAL OBJECTILE # 4, 1998

Acrílico pintado sobre vara de aluminio

116 x 156 cm

Cortesía: Angles Gallery, Santa Monica, CA. Fotógrafo: Brian Forrest



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