

frieze

Painter Painter

WALKER ART CENTER, MINNEAPOLIS, USA

Painter painter on the wall, who is the fairest of them all? It's been more than a decade since the Walker Art Center devoted a group exhibition to contemporary painting. That previous endeavour, 'Painting at the Edge of the World', curated by Douglas Fogle in 2001, brought together artists from ten different countries in order to examine the medium's dispersion as a logic into adjacent practices, such as performance and video. By contrast, 'Painter Painter', curated by Eric Crosby and Bartholomew Ryan, moved in the opposite direction, highlighting a group of mostly American artists: a generation of studio-based painters who reveal 'a fascination for the medium's many histories'. As the echoing title indicates, this was an exhibition characterized by repetition and reactivation; the primary focus was on the persistence of formal abstraction. In other words, the concern was with painting about painting, about methods and materials and process; as one of the curators noted: 'We've brought together works that are stained, rubbed, torn, collaged, sprayed, frayed, printed, stitched, glued, smeared, stretched, and so on.' To be sure, some formidable works were on display. But the overall atmosphere, while elegant, was also rather tepid."

The exhibition opened with a triptych of zigzagging compositions by Sarah Crouner. Composed of linen, coloured fabric and canvas both painted and raw, all cut and stitched together like a collage, the work called to mind the lineage of hard-edge geometric abstraction, from Theo van Doesburg and Sonia Delaunay to postwar figures like Lygia Clark. Crouner is open about her interest in using art history as a medium, as a score that can be reinterpreted and performed, or applied as a backdrop – as she puts it – for other theatrical activities. But if we were invited to approach 'Painter Painter' on those terms, as potential theatre, the question remains: where was the conflict? That, in short, was my beef. With minor exceptions – notably Molly Zuckerman-Hartung's installation, which bucks the status quo with a scene of bondage, like an art crime – there was little dissonance to be found. In light of the more pressing abstraction of financialization – indeed of the abstraction of everyday life that inflects the social context in which all of us are working, albeit unequally – one has to ask: why play it safe? If abstraction originated as a break with tradition, why do we keep turning it into one?

Given the limited gallery space and the inclusion of 15 artists, it was surprising that one of them, Matt Connors, had works in almost every room. At his best, Connors demonstrated what colour can do – how it can affect boundaries or lines with its physical properties, or produce optical effects, as seen in the chromatic shadows that bounce off two of his paintings with a touch of abracadabra. On the other hand, the two large-scale monochromatic inkjet prints that he rolled into tubes and stood on end as sculptures, came across as confectionary distractions, particularly when placed in proximity to the subtler palette of an artist like Zak Prekop. Prekop's sole contribution, *Untitled Transparency* (2012), is a large canvas that we are led to read through, as the title suggests: large portions of his oil and paper composition were painted from behind, so that colour was hushed, like a whisper.

Perpendicular to Prekop's work, Lesley Vance's trio of modestly-scaled paintings were among the more impressive pieces on display. With their virtuosic swerves, her sinuous forms tend to slice to and fro, as if projecting and receding into space simultaneously. In their details, ripe with painterly incident, each piece offered an adventure for perception. Another highlight was Alex Olson, who analyzes the time-tested language of mark-making. Along the lines of the Supports/Surfaces movement, though emphasizing surface over support, Olson takes painting's grammar, its lexicon, as her primary subject matter. Laying bare a disjunction in texture between figure and ground, she elevates painterly structure to image. The architecture of mark-making is narrativized. On the other hand, Scott Olson (no relation) contributes something more alchemic: applying naturally derived pigments to marble dust panels, his works seemed to conjure the ghosts of art history – Kandinsky, Paul Klee – while pitting spontaneity and fluidity against the force of the frame.

Framing, ultimately, is what I had issue with. To its credit, Crosby and Ryan's exhibition brought together a crew of talented painters – painter's painters, really – all of whom, for the record, happen to be white. While it situates their practices in terms of a generational impulse – all of the artists bar one were born in the 1970s – it does not go on to ask why. Why abstraction yet again? Why now? What, socially or politically or economically, is determining this fascination?

Recent years have shown us some ways in which abstraction can maintain its critical edge, for instance with the money paintings and tablecloths by Reena Spaulings. But when the legacy of abstraction has been unhinged from its attachment to social transformation, when it is reduced to pure style, self-reflexive but not self-critical, we should take pause to consider the values we produce in celebrating it.

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