Abstraction Out of Bounds

How has abstract painting weathered the challenges of the 1990s? In the first of two articles, the author examines five New York artists who are using sculptural form, installation, digitally altered video and blatant illusionism to redefine their medium.

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN
closet on the upper floor which happily tried to accommodate paintings by Lachner, Peter Halley and a third painter so visually overwhelming that I often could not remember his or her work. But even in the larger rooms on the ground floor, there was a good enough general feeling that often made it difficult to concentrate on individual paintings. I also assume that with a small institution such as Snug Harbor, budget constraints limited the curator's ability to borrow major elder works.

Despite such practical obstacles, Wei was able to field some strong works. For those who know only the canons of the '80s and '90s, it was illuminating to see compelling pictures by recognized figures such as David Salle, Mary Heilmann and David Reed. Not afraid to take chances, Wei interpreted works of widely recognized figures such as Jean Michel Basquiat and Elizabeth Murray and some well-known artists such as Melanie Faith, Martha Reilly and Denise Tuite. The second show was also admirably well-balanced in terms of gender.

Within her decade-by-decade layout Wei also proposed a half-dozon loose categories in which to fit the participants. The results of this classification were imperfect. It's hard to understand why artists as different as Bill Jensen and Pat Steir can be lumped in "Geometric or Expansive Abstraction." And if something called "Conceptual Abstraction" has to accommodate an inheritor of Op Art (Peter Schuyff) and an innovator of minimalist painting (Susan McClain) and a creator of stained fabric installations (Polyptrauma), it's probably better to drop the attempt to generalize altogether.

When confronted with the stylistic salat of "After the Fall," Wei had to choose a dominant tendency in today's abstract painting. The show included a wide array of painting-inspired artists such as Jensen and Gregory Amenoff and champions of sociological geometry such as Halley and Di Suo. It made sense to seek out and highlight the achievements of midcentury American painting (Cara Cohen, Melissa Meyer) and those who seek in his work. The show included the achievements of midcentury American painting (Cara Cohen, Melissa Meyer) and those who seek in his work.

Installation view of the exhibition "After the Fall" showing Syndicate's Fakka Fealkon, 1968, on display at Frances Stark's painting No. 8, 1975, on right wall; and an untitled 1968 work by Michaela Pluszak at extreme right on facing wall; at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Staten Island, New York. Photo Olivia Geoghegan.

My dear Linda, while it is truly a pleasure to share with you the news of your new job, I am also wondering how you are faring.

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Whitney Biennial...how many years back would one have to go before finding a Whitney Biennial with similar merit of abstraction...was undermined by a less publicized and very different show running within it at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art at Snug Harbor on Staten Island. The title of the exhibition, "After the Fall: Aspects of Abstract Painting since 1980," reflected a decade-by-decade layout Wei also proposed a half dozen loose categories in which to fit the participants. The results of this classification were imperfect. It's hard to understand why artists as different as Bill Jensen and Pat Steir can be lumped in "Geometric or Expansive Abstraction." And if something called "Conceptual Abstraction" has to accommodate an inheritor of Op Art (Peter Schuyff) and an innovator of minimalist painting (Susan McClain) and a creator of stained fabric installations (Polyptrauma), it's probably better to drop the attempt to generalize altogether.

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Reed’s forays into video and installation have involved Vertigo and the ‘80s TV show “Crime Story”; Stockholder speaks of her work as a “tenuous site where fiction and reality struggle.”

High-tech, high-energy paintings such as Polonaise and Boschwood, two giant canvases that not only forge relief elements but go so far in the opposite direction as to use spray-brushed shadows to create the illusion of physical depth. The essential problem with the paint-handling in Stella’s relief paintings is that the brush, that paragon of suppleness, is always forced to adapt itself to the stiff edges of the pre-cut aluminum shapes. As he returned to canvas, Stella was freed from this constraint and has been able to give his baroque inclinations greater scope. Stella’s decision to enlist pictorial illusion in his quest for new kinds of space is also a welcome change after a decade of thrusting sculptural extensions.

Stella was not the only painter to be taking a stand in print in the mid-’80s. A year after Working Space came out, Peter Halley published his Collected Essays 1981-87, a book that probably had more immediate influence on younger painters than did Stella’s lectures. At the time, whether or not one shared Halley’s admiration for Jean Baudrillard or responded to Halley’s Duchampian parodies, his insistence that geometric abstraction needed to take into consideration the digitalized, postindustrial vocabulary and methods of the contemporary world was compelling and challenging. If, in the mid-’80s, Stella upshot the station of painting as a vehicle of formal innovation, Halley did it as philosophical discovery by other means.¹

Until almost the end of the decade, Halley’s was the paradigmatic position. Abstraction came to be seen as a field in which the artist could insert encoded messages, subtle or not. If Stella could speak of “space” in terms of depth and shallowness, projection and recession, Halley had little interest in such issues. In my words, he wrote, “space is considered as... a digital field in which the field is seen as cells with synchronized and in real time with... non-literate societies.” This space is akin to the simulated space of the video game... a space that is not a specific reality but rather a model of the “cellular space” on which “cybermediated social exchange” is based.

The strategies of Non-Object—presenting geometric abstractions as “models” of intellectual concepts—goading modernist motifs in order to parody them, equipping the middle-class, suburban environment—have pervaded abstraction in the 1980s. Arid by these new stances and a constituting art market, a greenest of abstraction painters was able to run widespread interest in nonobjective painting. One reason their work met with such enthusiastic response is that they had started one of the stumbling blocks of abstraction: content. Whereas a painting by Albers or Stella confronts viewers with uncertainty as to its subject, the forms in a painting by Halley or Ross Bleckner have identifiable meanings.

But while abstraction’s meaning became more accessible, the compelling aspect of Neo-Geo, which depended so much on making allusions to the work of preceding generations of painters, began to take its toll. By 1989, even a sympathetic critic such as David Piggott noted that abstraction seemed “beautified, bereft of purpose, lacking an audience, and missing an agenda.”²

The late 1980s was a difficult time for those who envisioned painting as offering something other than diaphragms of sociological concepts and tongue-in-cheek visual communications on modernism. But out of that moment of irony and cynicism about the claims of abstraction came a new sense of possibility. Having brought to earth the idealists claims of modernist generation and indicated the shortcomings and arrogance of Greenbergian form, abstraction moved on from the main of the “critique.” Surprisingly, this evolution permitted it to deal effectively with some of the issues raised by Stella in Working Space.

David Reed: The Gesture Adrift

Arguably, the painter who has most explicitly addressed Stella’s concerns is David Reed, a New York-based artist now in his early 60s whose work is deeply engaged with the heritage of Baroque painting at the same time that it addresses hot contemporary issues. The connection between Stella’s ideas and Reed’s work was pointed out (by Tiffany Bell, writing in these pages)³ soon after Working Space came out, but even then, Reed was only aware of the general affinity that separated him from the older painter. In a 1994 article written in collaboration with philosopher David Carrier, Reed challenged aspects of Working Space. The article accused Stella of exaggerating and misrepresenting the importance of Campanari’s painting. In sentences that echo some of my own feelings, Reed and Carrier observed that this lends Stella the absolute mediator’s conclusion that the goal of abstraction should be to create a literal space, like that of his recent works, which may be large scale relief sculptures. The true power of Baroque art, and also of abstraction, is its capacity to create an illusionistic space. Stella misunderstands the spectator’s role. Painting circa 1660, circa 1960, involves the spatial and temporal relation of the spectator to the image. The aim of the Baroque was to establish contact with the spectator, which cannot be done within a literal space.⁴

In the years since he co-authored this response to Stella, Reed’s own work has undergone some significant changes, confronting new space—much of it so far from the literal as to be termed virtual—for his painting practice. Some of the changes, though by no means all, have been occurring on the canvas itself. For a long time, Reed’s paintings flirted with photographic effects. When presented under surfaces as smooth as a photographic print, his ebony, wet-infused marbling techniques with palette knife or painter’s brush often seemed closer to reproductions of gestures than to the real thing. By silhouetting gestures or parts of gestures against solid color fields, Reed heightened his photorealist associations. In 1984, he began incorporating actual...
Hye offers a variant of the deconstructed painting in an ongoing series of gestural compositions painted with oil, acrylic and enamel on the inside of clear glass boxes.

reproductions into his work. In his 1986 show at Max Protetch Gallery in New York, some of the paintings displayed side by side a gesture and its silhouetted double.

Throughout his decade, Reed has become increasingly fascinated with the melding of the real and the fictive. His paintings which combine actual and reproduced gestures subtly challenge the viewer’s ability to distinguish between the presence and absence of the artist’s hand. As Reed himself has pointed out, the kinds of issues raised by such works are very different from the quest for the sublime that drove the Abstract Expressionists. They are also a far cry from the materialism of the Post-Minimalist period in which Reed emerged. In place of the sublime or terminal- 

ycosa on paper-maché, 10% by 15 feet.

JETCOSA on paper-maché, 10% by 15 feet.

As these videos demonstrate, Reed’s current inspiration comes more often from TV and film than from the heritage of European painting which he relied on earlier in his career. There is more involved in this shift than simply low cultural ref- 

erences exchanged for high. In a recent interview, Reed explained: “I’ve found that the more I think about film the better it is for my paintings. If I fall into composing or balancing my paintings I’m lost, but if I think in filmic terms like a cut, a fade, or a pan shot it’s much better.”

Cinematic influences were also behind Reed’s 1977 installation in the Racoco splendor of the Neue Galerie in Graz, Austria. Aided glued decora- 
tions, crystal chandeliers and full mirrors, Reed installed several works each titled Framepainting for Graz, All by-10-hour horizontal cana- 

jewelry Stockholder and James Hyde: Hybrid Installations and Objects

As demonstrated by the work of a number of artists in their 30s or early 40s, Reed’s transition of painting’s space through video and installation is part of a larger exploration of painting’s “extended field,” to borrow the title of a recent Scandinavian exhibition. Seen in late 1986 and early 97 at the Stockholm Konsthalle and the Roseum in Malmi, “Painting—the Extended Field” included conventional painters (abstract and figurative) as well as sculptors and video artists. Looking at “methods not normally thought of as pertaining to painting” and the “cross- fertilization” of various media, the show roped in such diverse figures as Allan Kaprow, Yukino Toyagi, Paul McCarthy and Israeli sculptor Nahum Tevet. The danger with such a pan-painting approach is that the notion becomes so elastic, so “inerted” as to lose all meaning. Nonetheless, at least two of the artists in “Painting—the Extended Field,” Polly Apfelbaum (about whom more in a moment) and Jessica Stockholder, have created works in which painting, sculptural and installation tech- 

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In her crushed-velvet floor installations, Apfelbaum is capable of creating intense painterly experiences without coming within a thousand miles of a paintbrush or a stretcher bar.

Although she is generally thought of as a sculptor, the installation artist, Stockholder is already aware of her work’s nonmaterial qualities. As she put it to me in a 1986 interview [see A.L.A., Nov.], viewers of her work “technically...may be more related to sculpture than to painting, for it takes up space in the room, but conceptually it’s closer to painting.” Actually, Stockholder’s relationship in painting is far more “conceputal.”

The squares and rectangles of bright color she paints on the surfaces of everyday objects make her work seem like a perfectly integrated collaboration between an abstract painter and an assemblage-driven sculptor—imagine Hans Hofmann (or Barnett Newman) juggling fries with Rauschenberg (or Jean Tinguely). By drawing attention to the surfaces of the objects, the solid color paint opens our eyes to their formal properties, while the functional orientation of the quotidian stuff Stockholder utilizes continuously threatens to break up the three-dimensional abstract composition of which it is a part. The individual elements are at once distinct and inseparable. This tension is true of both her large-scale installations which play off their architectural surroundings and her smaller-scale mobile sculptures. Spinning in terms out of those used by Reed, Stockholder describes the painted surfaces in her work as “a tension where form and reality tangle with notions of subjectivity and objectivity.”

One can become entranced by the sheer color and form in her installations and a moment later be sent whirling by the brute physicality of the materials (blue onions imbedded in concrete, a dog hanging from a steel bar, etc.) and their sound and smell. Working with many influences but few real predecessors (only Kurt Schwitters and Judi Poff come to mind), Stockholder achieves to compelling three-dimensional abstract experience. Many are convinced that formalism is an invariably conservative, historically exhausted force—but as Stockholder argues, for those willing to relinquish the boundaries of painting, this is not the case.

Another artist who has been productively exploring the margins of painting in recent years is James Hyde. More obviously involved in Stockholder with the artisanal aspect of painting, Hyde often incorporates the demanding technical aspects of fresco into his work, albeit on an unorthodox support: thick slabs of Styrofoam. (Plaster is applied to one side of the Styrofoam, creating the wet surface necessary for fresco.) Hanging on the wall, these loosely brushed abstractions, resembling 2 or more feet deep, suggest chunks of wall salvaged from an archaeological site. Looking at them, it’s impossible to miss the contradiction: although plant and inorganic, the chunks of Styrofoam weigh almost nothing and the resemble fresco technique has been applied to a threeway piece of modern industry.

The use of fresco is not limited to Hyde’s Styrofoam works. The central element of Ziel (1985), for instance, is a 12 by 6-foot fresco wood panel bearing against the wall. A heavy sheet of glass, supported by an upright metal post, leaves away from the panel of painted tiles, overlapping rectangles of blues and yellows to create a wavy and elegant deconstruction of the traditional painting frame/glass format. Hyde offers another variant of decorative painting in an ongoing series of geometric compositions painted with acrylic and enamel on the insides of clear glass boxes. After the paint has been laid down, Hyde closes the box with a final sheet of glass, creating a see-through, haphazardly enclosed abstraction. When the paint is steadily used, it’s as if a sensation had been sliced off the surface of the piece. The new “Eclipse” series, too, is an example of this scientific experiment. In other instances, Hyde uses large clots of paint, crumpled paper and silkscreen to bulk up the painting. By submitting geometries to such three-dimensional visibility, Hyde transforms this embarrassment of abstract painting into a sculptural event. Propelled against the large glass boxes, some reaching as high as 8 feet, can sit directly on the floor or rest on steel brackets bolted to the wall. Their relation to the wall—they lean against it but never lie flat, as a painting would—underscores the dual nature of these painting sculpture hybrids.

The materials and formats Hyde uses are constantly evolving and expanding. Poe (1987), the centerpiece of his recent show at now closed The Paula Solomons Gallery in New York (the work was later shown at the Delos Center in Queens), is a huge (6 by 15-foot) wall piece made from hundreds of pieces of colored vinyl adhesive tape applied to an irregular support of steel and paper mâché. The straight edges and geometric shapes of the colored tape are in striking contrast to the incredibly crumpled surface onto which it has been stuck—the piece looks like a hard-edge painting that’s been through a trash compactor and then partially flattened out. The palette is predominantly blues and reds, but Hyde makes lively use of the wide range of colors that tape now comes in. Poe is so busy, in fact, that it takes a little while to notice that the colors are not evenly distributed but have been deliberately grouped to vary the visual form and weight of the piece. The work pulsates with memories of Stuart Davis and American quilts, but it is also dependent on its contemporary materials. Conventional paint and brush methods could not apply such smooth color into Poe’s razor crumplings.

Polly Apfelbaum and Mary Macarocio: The Canvas Unmoored

Of all the artists considered here, Polly Apfelbaum is perhaps the one whose link to painting is most tenuous, most “conceputal.” Her favored medium is crushed velvet or bed sheets which she stabs with colored dabs. The stained fabric is sometimes displayed in large unstretched rectangles that can hang on the wall, lie flat on the floor or sit in crumpled piles. However, the artist is just as likely to cut up the material into small squares or ellipses which are exhibited stacked or spread out. The patterns and colors of the stabs can allude to nature and popular culture, as well as remind the viewer of Apfelbaum’s debt to aspects of post-war abstraction, from Larry Poons to the Support/Surface group. Perhaps Apfelbaum’s most valuable contribution to current painting practice is to be found in her atomized compositions of separate patches of multicolored stained fabric as exemplified by her powerful installation Eclipse, shown first at Boesky & Gallery in New York [see A.L.A., Aug. 97] and later recreated and expanded for her show in the summer, Apfelbaum created a similar installation at the San Francisco Art Institute. Titled The High, the work employed thousands of pieces of dyed in spreading black-and-white compositions across the floor of the Institute’s large gallery. Whether in her floor installation or her wall hangings, Apfelbaum is capable of creating intense painterly experiences without coming within a thousand miles of a paintbrush or a stretcher bar.

In 1985, Apfelbaum, Hyde and Stockholder were included in the 44th Concordia Biennial, which took as its theme: “Painting Outside Painting.” The curator, Torrie Sultan, brought together artists who, in her words, had “made a break with the basic form and function of the classical or modern painted object.” Sultan cited the influence of film and television on contemporary painting but she also suggested that in response to “a shrinkage of visual painting, has painting again begun to reassess the value of the handiwork.” The show stressed both the “physical” and “psychological” rediminition of painting.

Given this position, it was no surprise that Sultan (included work by the painters Fabian Marcaccio. Although he stops well short of the installation strategies employed by Stockholder and Apfelbaum, Marcaccio is a radical deconstruct-
Along with an overload of visual ideas, Maraccio brings to the traditionally high-minded realm of abstraction a visually punning sensibility that is at times almost slapstick.

The works included in the exhibition "Barocco (Continuing)" at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, which runs through the end of the year, are an extension of the artist’s previous exploration of the relationship between abstraction and the Baroque style. Maraccio’s paintings, which are characterized by their bold, playful, and often humorous qualities, have been praised for their ability to confront the viewer with a sense of play and wit. The exhibition features a range of works, including oil paintings, sculptures, and installations, that explore the intersection of these two artistic traditions.

Maraccio’s work is known for its use of bold, saturated colors and a sense of movement and energy that is both playful and intense. His paintings often depict fantastical, almost surreal landscapes, with figures and objects that seem to be in constant motion. The artist’s use of light and shadow is also a prominent feature of his work, with the play of light creating a sense of depth and intrigue.

In this new body of work, Maraccio continues to push the boundaries of abstraction by integrating elements from the Baroque period. This combination of styles creates a new, hybrid aesthetic that is both familiar and surprising. The result is a series of works that are both visually striking and thought-provoking, inviting the viewer to see the world in a new and imaginative way.

Maraccio’s paintings are not just visually arresting; they are also conceptually rich. By incorporating elements of the Baroque period, Maraccio challenges our assumptions about what abstraction can be and how it can be used to create meaning. The artist’s work is a testament to the power of art to transcend boundaries and to engage us on multiple levels, from the purely aesthetic to the more philosophical.

Overall, Maraccio’s exhibition "Barocco (Continuing)" is a must-see for fans of abstraction and for anyone interested in the ongoing dialogue between different artistic traditions.